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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**FROM SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE TO PROBLEMATIC
OFFENSE: THE DEVOLUTION OF UNCONVENTIONAL
WARFARE**

by

Timothy S. Ball

December 2016

Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Anna Simons
Michael Richardson

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**FROM SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE TO PROBLEMATIC OFFENSE: THE
DEVOLUTION OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE**

Timothy S. Ball
Major, United States Army
B.A., Texas A&M University, 2004

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
December 2016**

Approved by: Dr. Anna Simons
Thesis Advisor

COL Michael Richardson
Second Reader

Dr. John Arquilla
Chair, Department of Defense Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Unconventional warfare (UW) originated in World War II as a defensive tactic, utilized to assist an occupied ally during a conventional war. Since then, Special Forces (SF) has changed the definition of UW to include offensive regime change as a strategic option. This type of UW was practiced extensively by the Central Intelligence Agency during the Cold War with poor results. The use of offensive UW by the United States is problematic for a variety of reasons, ranging from unreliable proxy forces to unpredictable results and negative international perception. The use of defensive UW under certain conditions remains justified and practical, but retains many of the same issues. After examining the history of the United States' use of UW, this thesis concludes that Special Forces better serves the nation's interests by promoting itself as the premier combined force of the United States military.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AIOC	Anglo-Iranian Oil Company
AQ	al-Qaeda
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
DNC	Democratic National Committee
DOD	Department of Defense
EUCOM	U.S. European Command
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FID	foreign internal defense
GW	guerilla warfare
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JFC	joint forces command
KSK	Kommando Spezialkräfte
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NRF	NATO Response Force
NSHQ	NATO Special Operations Headquarters
ODA	Operational Detachment – Alpha
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PCI	Italian Communist Party
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander – Europe
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SF	Special Forces
SFA	security force assistance
SFQC	Special Forces Qualification Course
SOCFAF	Special Operations Command Africa

SOF	special operations forces
SOG	Special Operations Group
SOLA	Special Operations Legislative Affairs
SPG	Special Procedures Group
TF	task force
U.S.	United States
UAR	unconventional assisted recovery
UFCO	United Fruit Company
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USASOC	United States Army Special Operations Command
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
USG	United States government
UW	Unconventional Warfare
VJTF	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force

I. INTRODUCTION

In April 2011, a group of nearly 150 U.S. Army soldiers shuffled into a small auditorium at Camp Mackall, a seldom heard of facility outside of Fayetteville, North Carolina. The soldiers ranged from officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with years of combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, to baby-faced enlisted men with less time in the Army than some of the veterans had in combat deployments.

Regardless of experience, the soldiers were there for a common purpose. They were starting Robin Sage, the fifth and final stage of the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC). After over a year of training that involved learning a new language, small unit tactics, and a specialty skill, the soldiers had only one more stage to complete in order to earn the right to wear a green beret and become fully qualified members of the Army's famed Special Forces (SF).¹

After the group was seated, a Master Sergeant instructor in his late 30s walked onto the stage. He welcomed the students and reminded them that they were not done with the course yet. This last stage would test the skills they had learned in the previous phases, and provide a final evaluation as to whether or not they deserved to graduate. The Master Sergeant then began an impassioned speech about why Robin Sage was so important.

The Arab Spring was sweeping across North Africa and parts of the Middle East. Protests had recently erupted in Syria, with the Assad regime responding with deadly force. And, in Libya, a revolution was taking place. After decades of oppression by dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the people of Libya wanted freedom. The Master Sergeant looked towards the Special Forces crest painted on the wall of the auditorium, emblazoned with the unit's motto: *De Oppresso Liber* (To Free the Oppressed). With an angry face, he looked back toward the students and asked, "Why aren't Special Forces on the ground in Libya?"

¹ Special Forces (SF) refers specifically to United States Army Special Forces, whose members are commonly referred to as Green Berets. Other special operations forces (SOF) include units such as the United States Army Rangers and United States Navy SEALs.

“Too many years in Iraq,” he told the students, “too many years in Afghanistan conducting kinetic operations.” SF could no longer execute its primary task and its core mission: unconventional warfare (UW). Green Berets were not chosen to conduct UW in Libya, because they had forgotten how. Robin Sage was vital because it would remind students that UW was their primary mission, and they had to be ready to execute it at any given time. Unfortunately, despite his well-intended bravado, the Master Sergeant had just mischaracterized and oversimplified a mission, UW, which has been repeatedly changed, expanded, and molded to fit real and perceived threats to the United States as they occurred over the last seven decades.

At its core, “UW is specifically one topic: support to resistance movements and insurgencies.”² When, where, and to whom that support should be provided remains an important question for the United States to consider before embarking on an unconventional warfare mission. This thesis will contend that when utilized in a preemptive or offensive manner, UW often results in unintended consequences that prove detrimental to the long-term strategic interests of the United States. It is therefore vital that U.S. policy makers understand the limited scenarios in which the use of UW is appropriate, while still recognizing the potential pitfalls that come with supporting a proxy force.

It is important to note that the scope of this thesis is limited to the use of UW by the United States since 1945, and not by other countries elsewhere in the world. While the definition of UW has changed over the years, and continues to differ by audience, this thesis will use the current joint doctrinal definition of unconventional warfare: “Activities to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating with an underground, auxiliary, or guerrilla force in a denied area.”³ This is the definition of unconventional warfare that I will apply to historical case studies, and the definition I will utilize when examining the viability of UW in today’s world.

² Mark Grdovic, “Unconventional Warfare: The Current Dilemma,” slideshow presentation delivered to the author on 04 October 2016.

³ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Unconventional Warfare, Joint Publication 3-05.1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 15 September 2015), vii.

II. ORIGINS OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE AND ITS PRACTITIONERS

A. THE OSS AND THE JEDBURGHES—PLAYING DEFENSE

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was established on 13 June 1942 under William Donovan.⁴ While its primary mission was to conduct intelligence operations, the OSS conducted “unconventional warfare” as its secondary task.⁵ Today’s definition of UW includes the potential for disruption or overthrow of a sitting government, or expulsion of an occupying power, but the intent for OSS units was much different:

The original concept for such special forces in World War II Europe was to support British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s idea of engaging the people of occupied Europe in a guerrilla war against the Germans. In this way, Churchill hoped to tie down enemy forces by compelling them to engage in counter-guerrilla operations far from the front lines. Guerrillas could also sabotage railways and ambush enemy columns, delaying reinforcements from reaching the front and improving the prospect for Allied victory and a reduction in Allied casualties.⁶

This distinction is important. Far from being the main effort in pushing the Germans out of occupied France, or overthrowing the Vichy government, these original units were meant to sabotage and distract German forces to ease the advance of the main Allied force.

To help accomplish these objectives, the OSS assembled 3-man teams, assigning them the codename “Jedburghs.”⁷ Each team was comprised of two officers and an enlisted radio operator. One of the officers had to be American or British, while the second officer’s nationality was required to correspond with that of the country the team

⁴ “What Was OSS,” Central Intelligence Agency, last modified 28 June 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/intelligence-history/oss/art03.htm>.

⁵ Troy J. Sacquety, “Office of Strategic Services: A Primer on the Special Operations Branches and Detachments of the Office of Strategic Services,” *Veritas*, PB 31-05-2 3, no. 4 (December 2007).

⁶ Will Irwin, *The Jedburghs: The Secret History of the Allied Special Forces, France 1944* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), xix.

⁷ This portion of the OSS focused almost exclusively on occupied France and other parts of Europe, but the OSS also deployed other units to the Pacific theater, such as Det 101.

would be operating in.⁸ Many of the teams were dropped into occupied France, where they linked up with various French resistance groups, organized arms drops, and conducted sabotage operations against the Germans as the main Allied force advanced from the Normandy coast.

Today, the OSS continues to be revered by the Special Forces community. “Considered a legacy unit of U.S. Army Special Operations Forces, the Office of Strategic Services has assumed almost mythical stature since World War II.”⁹ At the center of this “mythical stature” is the familiar UW mission: “It was this element of the OSS that provided the most exciting stories and which was cloaked by an aura of secrecy and mystery. These UW missions have become the subject of numerous books and several films.”¹⁰

However, today’s version of UW differs significantly from what was expected during World War II. The Jedburghs of 1944 were meant to do no more than assist French resistance forces in guerrilla-type operations against the Germans. This tactical-level tasking was *their* definition of unconventional warfare. Today, the doctrinal definition (and expectation) of unconventional warfare has expanded to the point that proponents of the strategy admit that the UW mission is now a “US national strategic mission,” that requires interagency and Department of Defense (DOD) cooperation.¹¹ Additionally, UW has now been declared, “an offensive option for policymakers and strategists.”¹² The Jedburghs of 1944 were used in *defense* of an occupied ally in the midst of a world war. So, how did the concept and definition of UW expand to include an *offensive* option meant to disrupt sitting governments around the world?

⁸ Irwin, *Jedburghs: The Secret History*, 64.

⁹ Sacquety, “Office of Strategic Services.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David S. Maxwell, “Unconventional Warfare Does Not Belong to Special Forces,” *War on the Rocks*, 12 August 2013, <http://warontherocks.com/2013/08/unconventional-warfare-does-not-belong-to-special-forces/>.

¹² Ibid.

B. THE CREATION OF THE CIA AND COVERT ACTION

While World War II continued to rage across Europe in 1944, Bill Donovan had already started advocating for a post-war version of the OSS to continue its intelligence operations.¹³ Following the end of World War II and “a long series of disputes between the State, War, and Navy Departments and the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) over who a new ‘national intelligence structure’ would answer to,”¹⁴ President Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947, officially creating the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). At the time of its creation, one third of the CIA’s personnel had OSS experience from World War II.¹⁵ This experience would be put to use during the CIA’s earliest operations.

The CIA’s creation led to further debate, this time over the proposed use of covert action, and who would be responsible for it. At the time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff thought that propaganda and covert activities were more suited to the State Department than to the Department of Defense.¹⁶ However, Secretary of State George Marshall made it quite clear that he and the State Department wanted nothing to do with covert action. “The Secretary of State was unwilling to accept *responsibility* for such activities . . . on grounds that their exposure would discredit the State Department itself.”¹⁷ As a result, “the CIA took operational responsibility for the United States’ covert action programme as a consequence of Marshall’s fear of exposure.”¹⁸

Why, we might wonder, were so many senior decision makers—including the architect of perhaps the greatest “day after” plan—so hesitant to take responsibility for covert action?

A covert operation, as defined by the Department of Defense, is “an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the

¹³ James Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War: U.S. Policy, Intelligence, and CIA Operations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 16.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 23

¹⁸ Ibid.

sponsor.”¹⁹ Historian John Nutter adds to this definition by saying that “a *covert action* is an operation intended to change the political policies, actors, or institutions of another country, performed so that the covert actor’s role is not apparent.”²⁰ In 1976, the Church Committee defined covert action as “any clandestine operation or activity designed to influence foreign governments, organizations, persons or events in support of United States foreign policy.”²¹

While these definitions vary, commonalities can be found in both military and academic literature when it comes to covert action. The first is concealment of the sponsor. The second relates to the purpose, which is to exert American influence over another government, organization, or individual. It is this second shared feature that ties covert action to today’s definition of unconventional warfare.

John Nutter goes on to define the types of covert operations as including “paramilitary actions, terrorism, assassinations, manipulating or ‘fixing’ election, arms supplying, and propaganda campaigns.”²² James Callanan divides covert action into four categories: “(1) propaganda and psychological warfare; (2) political operations such as supporting democratic parties and labour unions in friendly countries; (3) economic operations; and (4) paramilitary action which includes counterinsurgency and assassination programs.”²³ Every one of these categories of covert action could be associated with coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing other governments.

Given that covert action is comprised of these activities, what then distinguishes unconventional warfare?

¹⁹ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, *Joint Publication 1-02* (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 8 November 2010), as amended through 15 February 2016, 55.

²⁰ John Jacob Nutter, *The CIA’s Black Ops* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 19.

²¹ U.S. Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate: Together with Additional, Supplemental, and Separate Views*, vol. 1, *Foreign and Military Intelligence – Book 1* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 26 April 1976), 141.

²² Nutter, *CIA’s Black Ops*, 19.

²³ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 1.

C. SPECIAL FORCES AND THE ORIGINAL DEFINITION OF UW

While the CIA began to experiment with offensive covert action in the years following World War II, another Jedburgh veteran was establishing a new unit within the United States Army. Colonel Aaron Bank officially established the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in the summer of 1952. Originally garrisoned at Ft. Bragg, the Group soon moved to Bad Tölz, Germany in order to be better positioned to accomplish its mission.

Like their CIA counterparts, many of the original members of Special Forces had extensive experience with the OSS and Jedburgh programs during World War II, and “brought unconventional warfare tactics and techniques to Special Forces in the early 1950s.”²⁴ However, the dispersing of OSS veterans into two separate organizations created a debate as to who would assume responsibility for the activities that had been conducted by the OSS during World War II.²⁵ The eventual conclusion was that the CIA would handle peacetime activities, while Special Forces (SF) would be in charge during wartime.²⁶ This was a less-than-ideal solution that assumed future conflicts would involve declared wars, most likely involving the Soviet Union. The OSS veterans who had joined Special Forces objected to this split, but nonetheless began to produce doctrine that would help define their mission and purpose.²⁷

In 1955, the term “unconventional warfare” first appeared in an Army Field Manual, which defined it as “the inter-related fields of guerrilla warfare, escape and evasion, and subversion against hostile states.”²⁸ This definition took the *techniques* used by the OSS and grouped them into a *mission*. The chapters in the early Special Forces field manuals were devoted to subjects like guerrilla communications, logistics, and the selection and set-up of resupply drop zones. Special Forces “A-Teams” were seen as

²⁴ Sacquety, “Office of Strategic Services.”

²⁵ Mark Grdovic. “Fundamentals of Unconventional Warfare,” slideshow presentation delivered to the author on 05 October 2016.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Special Forces Group (Airborne) (U)*, *Field Manual 31-20* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 1955), 132.

tactical level trainers, tasked to train resistance forces and conduct sabotage operations with friendly guerrillas.

Unlike their brethren in the CIA, the original members of Special Forces did not immediately try to adapt unconventional warfare into an offensive mission. Instead, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), “was expected to exploit the resistance potential in eastern Europe *if* the Soviets attacked the West.”²⁹ The Lodge-Philbin Act of 1950 allowed Special Forces to recruit foreign nationals from Eastern Europe into their ranks, creating a “stay behind” unit full of locals who could instantly blend into the local population in the event of a Soviet invasion.³⁰ The original Green Berets fell into the “break glass in case of emergency” category. Their posture in Germany was primarily defensive, and their original mission was only to be executed in the event of a Soviet offensive.

Over 60 years later, the concept of unconventional warfare is now the subject of a joint publication that fully embraces UW as a strategy, not a tactic. This publication breaks unconventional warfare into two types. The first is defined as a supporting line of operation within a broader military campaign.³¹ This is essentially a replica of the Jedburgh experience in World War II, and has merit in the event of a U.S. ally being invaded or occupied. However, “the second type of UW is employed as the strategic main effort, either as an initiative or as a response to aggression.”³² It is this second type that definitively links today’s idea of unconventional warfare to what the CIA has historically referred to as covert action. This is also the type of UW that has resulted in long-term strategic failure for the United States over the past 70 years.

²⁹ Joel Nadel with J. R. Wright. *Special Men and Special Missions: Inside American Special Operations Forces 1945 to the Present* (London: Greenhill Books, 1994), 33. Emphasis added.

³⁰ H. A. Gill III, *A Soldier Under Three Flags: Exploits of Special Forces Captain Larry A. Thorne* (California: Pathfinder Publishing, 1998), 123.

³¹ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-05.1*, I-5.

³² *Ibid.*

III. THE CIA TAKES UW ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST COMMUNISM

As the newly formed 10th Special Forces Group was building its capacity to assist partisans behind Soviet lines, the CIA embarked on a period of experimentation with offensive unconventional warfare. Some of its missions achieved immediate tactical success for the CIA, leading to the false assumption that UW could be used throughout the Cold War at minimal cost to the United States.

A. SETTING THE STAGE: ITALY 1948

As the U.S. began implementing the Marshall Plan to help bring some level of stability back to post-World War II Europe, Italy emerged as a battleground in what would become a half century-long Cold War against communism. With the 1948 Italian elections on the horizon, President Truman and the United States recognized that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had emerged as the clear favorite.³³ Viewing the emergence of an Italian communist government as a threat to the stability of the surrounding region and the rebuilding of Europe as a whole, Truman authorized actions to prevent the communists from winning, which led to the CIA's initial foray into unconventional warfare.³⁴

Still in its infancy, the exact role of the CIA was still being heavily debated; it had no specific authorization to conduct covert operations. The Truman Administration's primary efforts were concentrated on overt political actions, sponsoring a "massive propaganda effort,"³⁵ while pledging military support and funds on the condition that the communists were not elected.³⁶

The smaller, covert portion of this strategy began with the CIA's creation of the Special Procedures Group (SPG) in late 1947, a group specifically tasked to intervene in

³³ Nutter, *CIA's Black Ops*, 51.

³⁴ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 24; Ironically, Nutter notes that the PCI "had been the most effective antifascist resistance organization during World War II."

³⁵ Nutter, *CIA's Black Ops*, 52.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

the Italian elections.³⁷ Utilizing a \$10 million budget, the SPG began laundering money and delivering it to anti-communist political organizations,³⁸ while also launching a disinformation campaign involving promises of a Soviet-controlled government if the PCI was to win.³⁹

The result of these efforts was the defeat of the PCI in the 1948 elections. The Italian operation “established covert action as a viable menu choice for American presidents,”⁴⁰ and “helped to convince America’s political elite of the value of psychological warfare as a tool of containment.”⁴¹ While the bulk of this operation was conducted via overt support to Italian political parties friendly to America, the CIA had convinced itself and decision makers that its limited use of covert tactics could be expanded into a standalone campaign.

B. FIRST SIGNS OF TROUBLE: ALBANIA AND BGFIEND

As the 1950s began, the CIA had yet another opportunity to recognize some of the drawbacks of unconventional warfare. Albania had fallen under Soviet influence after World War II, and was being run by a communist government under Enver Hoxha.⁴² In conjunction with Britain’s MI6, the CIA launched BGFIEND, an operation designed to overthrow Hoxha and eliminate communist influence in Albania. The operation was a complete failure.

As the CIA and MI6 launched BGFIEND, double-agent Kim Philby was leaking details of the operation to the Soviets.⁴³ Meanwhile, the planners were unable to identify a “viable political alternative to Hoxha.”⁴⁴ In a statement that should make anyone involved in 21st century policy decisions about Afghanistan shudder, James Callanan notes that, “Where the judgement of BGFIEND’s planners was seriously flawed was in

³⁷ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 37–38.

³⁹ Nutter, *CIA’s Black Ops*, 52.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 43.

⁴² Ibid., 70.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 81.

their failure to recognize the fact that little in the way of a sense of national identity existed in Albania. The country was essentially a collection of tribes.”⁴⁵

Yet, none of this mattered to the CIA. BGFIEND’s planners regarded the operation as a case study to be learned from rather than an indicator that an offensive UW mission has inherent flaws. Determined to learn from its mistakes in BGFIEND, the CIA decided to try again.

C. TPAJAX: FALSE HOPE FOR UW

During Dwight Eisenhower’s 1952 presidential campaign, future Secretary of State John Foster Dulles criticized the Truman administration for failing to stop communist influence in Iran.⁴⁶ Dulles’ brother, Allen, was also slated to become the director of the CIA under Eisenhower. Together, this created a perfect storm of top U.S. officials who were “more eager than their predecessors to use the CIA’s covert political action capabilities.”⁴⁷ This eagerness would lead to unconventional warfare completing its conversion to an offensive mission during the Eisenhower administration.

Sharing the Dulles brothers’ concern about the spread of communism, Eisenhower utilized the CIA to conduct preemptive unconventional warfare throughout his presidency. The goal of Eisenhower’s unconventional warfare was simple:

The removal of Third World leaders whose nonaligned stances left their countries vulnerable to communist takeover, and the subsequent replacement of those leaders with strongly pro-Western successors who could be relied upon to pursue policies that were compatible with American interests, if not always with the interests of the populations that they represented.⁴⁸

According to the CIA’s own after action report, at the end of 1952 it had been determined that the democratically-elected government under Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq was “in real danger of falling behind the Iron Curtain; if that

⁴⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁶ Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État against Mosaddeq,” in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, eds. Mark Gasiorowski and Malcom Byrne (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 231.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁸ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 87.

happened it would mean a victory for the Soviets in the Cold War and a major setback for the West in the Middle East.”⁴⁹ Beyond the Eisenhower Administration’s anxiety about communist influence in Iran, oil also played a key role:

Mosaddeq moved quickly to end British exploitation of Iran, in which a British company, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), earned ten times as much profit as it paid in royalties to Iran. Mosaddeq nationalized the country’s oil facilities, reduced the young shah to a figurehead, and legalized the small Iranian Communist Party, the *Tudeh*. Although Mosaddeq offered compensation to the AIOC . . . Britain organized a boycott of Iranian oil, but this failed to have immediate political effect, so it then turned to the United States, and the CIA for help.⁵⁰

The combined venture between the CIA and Britain’s MI6 would be called Operation TPAJAX, with the stated goal of causing “the fall of the Mossadeq government; to reestablish the prestige and power of the Shah; and to replace the Mossadeq government with one which would govern Iran according to constructive policies.”⁵¹

The specifics of TPAJAX are not as important as the overall outcome and the long-term effects of the operation. The coup itself was successful—Mossadeq was ousted and replaced by the Shah with the support of General Fazlullah Zahedi, a former Nazi sympathizer whose less appealing character traits were ignored by Foster Dulles in favor of General Zahedi’s eagerness to appease his American sponsors.⁵² In moves that should have surprised no one, Zahedi began to consolidate power around the Shah after the coup, eliminating political competitors and contributing to the environment that would eventually lead to the Iranian Revolution.⁵³

The irony in the fact that the United States had successfully ousted a democratically elected government, only to replace it with an authoritarian monarchy, was apparently lost on the Eisenhower Administration as well as on the participants in the

⁴⁹ Donald Newton Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952–August 1953*, Clandestine Service History (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, Clandestine Service, 1969), iii.

⁵⁰ Nutter, *CIA’s Black Ops*, 53.

⁵¹ Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran*, iii-iv.

⁵² Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 112–113.

⁵³ Gasiorowski, “1953 Coup d’État against Mosaddeq,” 257.

coup, all of whom showed an astounding degree of arrogance following the operation. One of the primary architects of the coup, CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt (Theodore's grandson), begins his published account by declaring, "This book ends in triumph . . . the Shah said to me truthfully, 'I owe my throne to God, my people my army—and to you!' By 'you' he meant me *and* the two countries—Great Britain and the United States—I was representing. We were all heroes."⁵⁴

Worth noting is that by the time Roosevelt wrote his account of TPAJAX in 1979, Iran was in the midst of another revolution. Originally considered an asset by the CIA and the U.S. government, the Shah had since become a liability. Once in power, the Shah proved less interested in doing what the United States wanted him to, and more interested in consolidating that power through the elimination of competitors and the oppression of his people. The results of these actions and their long-term effects are succinctly captured by Mark Gasiorowski in his account of TPAJAX:

Many Iranians blamed this on the United States, arguing that the 1953 coup and the extensive U.S. support for the shah in subsequent years were largely responsible for the shah's arbitrary rule. As a result, the revolution had a deeply anti-American character, and U.S.-Iran relations have remained tense ever since. Indeed, the coup has had such a powerful impact on Iran's political consciousness that many Iranians today still believe the United States is working covertly to undermine or overthrow their government.⁵⁵

As he watched the 1978–1979 Iranian Revolution nullify the success achieved by TPAJAX, Roosevelt was quick to bookend his account of the operation with both excuses and blame. According to Roosevelt, the fact that the Shah was viewed by his people as an American puppet contributed nothing to the Iranian Revolution. Neither did his authoritarian crackdowns and elimination of political rivals. Instead, it was "the growth of political ambitions" that brought down a man who Roosevelt regarded as the second most successful leader in Iranian history.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979), ix.

⁵⁵ Gasiorowski, "1953 Coup d'État against Mosaddeq," 261.

⁵⁶ Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, x.

In his debriefing by the Eisenhower Administration, Roosevelt wasted no time in pinning future UW debacles on John Foster Dulles. Describing him as a smiling, purring cat, Roosevelt claimed that Dulles simply did not want to listen to warnings about the difficulty of future UW endeavors, and was instead eager to embark on them.⁵⁷ Roosevelt tried to warn Dulles one last time, telling him, “If our analysis had been wrong, we’d have fallen flat on our, er, faces. But it was right. If we, the CIA, are ever going to try something like this again, we must be absolutely sure that the people and army want what we want. If not, you had better give the job to the Marines!”⁵⁸

In this briefing, Roosevelt claimed that he and his peers had gotten their analysis right, and that the CIA had successfully assessed the situation and people in Iran.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that TPAJAX involved rigged elections, staged protests, and a massive misinformation campaign, Roosevelt confidently told Eisenhower that, “With some help from us,” the Iranian people freely chose an authoritarian monarch over their democratically elected prime minister.⁶⁰

Yes, Operation TPAJAX secured Iran as an ally for the United States for roughly 25 years. However, the adversarial relationship between the two countries is now approaching 40 years in length. Since the Iranian revolution, Iran has become a major power broker in the Middle East that has consistently antagonized the United States and, in some cases, killed American service members. The failed Iranian hostage rescue, Operation EAGLE CLAW, resulted in the death of eight Americans and the public humiliation of the country. The Iran-Iraq War resulted in dozens more American casualties, and another international embarrassment for the United States when a U.S. Navy destroyer shot down an Iranian commercial airliner, killing all onboard.

After being declared a member of the “Axis of Evil” by President George W. Bush in 2002, Iran became all the more eager to assist insurgents fighting against U.S. forces in Iraq following the 2003 invasion. Leading this unconventional warfare

⁵⁷ Ibid., 209–210.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

campaign was Major General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Iranian Quds Force. Exact numbers are difficult to determine, but Iranian training and equipment from the Quds Force is estimated to have caused hundreds of American deaths during the Iraq War.⁶¹ When the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) reemerged in 2014, Suleimani was quickly spotted on the ground in Iraq, advising Shi'a militias while further complicating the relationship between the U.S. and the heavily Iranian-influenced Iraqi government.⁶²

Of course, at the time of the 1953 coup, none of these prospects was envisioned by the Eisenhower Administration. Asking someone to predict future world events is a losing proposition. However, appreciating that unpredictability is crucial when weighing whether or not unconventional warfare is a viable strategy. When an overthrow is successful, history has shown that there is little to no control over the installed replacement. Whether that replacement is the result of unconventional warfare, as in the case of the Shah, or is instead the product of a full-scale conventional invasion as in the case of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, there is no guarantee that the new leader will continue to do what the U.S. government wants him to do once he is in power.

D. NO TURNING BACK: PBSUCCESS

While Roosevelt's descriptions of the over-eager, cat-like John Foster Dulles are amusing, decisions made following TPAJAX reveal that his assessment of the Secretary of State was correct. The Eisenhower Administration considered TPAJAX a major success, leading to Eisenhower's subsequent approval of Operation PBSUCCESS, a plan to overthrow the democratically elected government of Guatemala.⁶³ As with TPAJAX, the exact specifics of the overthrow are less important to the study of unconventional warfare than the results of the operation.

⁶¹ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>.

⁶² Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "General Qasem Soleimani: Iran's rising star," *BBC News*, 06 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27883162>.

⁶³ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 118.

President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was elected president of Guatemala in 1950, following the six-year term of Juan José Arévalo.⁶⁴ Under reforms instituted by Arévalo and Arbenz, increased rights were granted to Guatemalan laborers, which directly threatened profits of the United Fruit Company (UFCO). Responding to this threat, UFCO not only dispatched some of its executives to meet with high-ranking officials in the State Department and the CIA, but also unleashed a propaganda campaign designed to promote the narrative that Arbenz's government was moving toward communism.⁶⁵

In the waning days of the Truman Administration, the CIA had executed Operation PBFORTUNE in an effort to provide arms to dissidents and assist them in overthrowing Arbenz.⁶⁶ However, word of America's involvement in arming the rebels quickly spread, causing Secretary of State Dean Acheson to terminate the operation.⁶⁷ PBSUCCESS emerged once the Eisenhower Administration had noted the "success" of TPAJAX. It was thought that the same template used in Iran could be applied to Guatemala.

Roosevelt fretted that, "If we, the CIA, are ever going to try something like this [TPAJAX] again, we must be absolutely sure that people and army [sic] want what we want."⁶⁸ Ignoring this advice, the CIA executed PBSUCCESS with "no existing intelligence networks in place in Guatemala immediately prior to the preparations for the coup."⁶⁹ Yet, despite its lack of preparation, the CIA still managed to achieve a regime change. Utilizing an "intensive paramilitary and psychological campaign," PBSUCCESS replaced "a popular, elected government with a political nonentity."⁷⁰

Once again, the CIA and the Eisenhower Administration patted themselves on the back while declaring outright victory. This "triumph confirmed the belief of many in the Eisenhower administration that covert operations offered a safe, inexpensive substitute

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952–1954* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 14–20.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 29–30.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, 210.

⁶⁹ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 110.

⁷⁰ Cullather, *CIA's Classified Account of its Operations*, 7.

for armed force in resisting Communist inroads in the Third World.”⁷¹ However, as with TPAJAX, the results of the operation would lead to further complications.

The aftermath of PBSUCCESS did not result in the same long-term adversarial relationship that TPAJAX produced, but the consequences of the coup were embarrassing to the United States nonetheless. Within three years of the coup, Arbenz’s successor was assassinated, resulting in decades of dictatorships and turmoil in Guatemala.⁷² The CIA’s own website contains literature describing the coup as “shameful,” due to the years of oppression that followed.⁷³ Thanks to American involvement in the coup, other countries viewed any American activity abroad with suspicion. Eisenhower himself never showed any remorse for the violence and destruction resulting from PBSUCCESS, leading President Bill Clinton finally to apologize to the Guatemalan people during a 1999 visit.⁷⁴

The tactical successes claimed for TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS emboldened the American government to continue its use of unconventional warfare in various forms over the next five decades. Scholars have noted that the perceived achievements of TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS were primary contributors to later decisions to conduct UW operations such as the Bay of Pigs.⁷⁵ As the Cold War accelerated, with both the Soviet Union and the United States rapidly achieving new technologies capable of wiping each other out completely, Eisenhower and his successors were lured into the false belief that unconventional warfare was a viable policy option and strategy that could stop the spread of communism without resulting in World War III. Like the coups in Iran and Guatemala, the operations that followed would occasionally yield what appeared to be immediate success, only to later lead to complications and embarrassment for the United States.

Indeed, after the perceived success of TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS, the United States spent the next four decades investing in unconventional warfare campaigns, mainly

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 129.

⁷³ David M. Barrett, “Sterilizing a ‘Red Infection’: Congress, the CIA and Guatemala, 1954,” *Studies in Intelligence* 44, no. 5 (08 May 2007), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol44no5/html/v44i5a03p.htm>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

as part of the continued effort to stop the spread of communism. In 2009, the United States John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School released the publication, *A Leader's Handbook to Unconventional Warfare*. This handbook is designed to offer a quick overview of UW, but also includes nearly six pages of UW history. The author, Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Mark Grdovic, lists UW campaigns from the end of World War II through the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The details of each of these campaigns are beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is interesting to note how he describes each effort. Some of the campaigns listed by Grdovic include:

- **The CIA in Tibet (1955–1969)** – Grdovic calls this a well-executed campaign, but notes that “no level of tactical success in Tibet could defeat the Chinese.” By the end of this effort, the U.S. had abandoned the Tibetan resistance forces in order to re-establish diplomatic relations with China.⁷⁶
- **The CIA in Indonesia (1957–1958)** – This campaign came on the heels of TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS as the U.S. government tried to support a coup in a country that “was not considered a belligerent state.”⁷⁷ Grdovic notes that, “During the course of the support effort, direct American support was exposed several times causing embarrassment to the United States.”⁷⁸ After a U.S. pilot was shot down and captured by Indonesian forces, Eisenhower tried to disavow knowledge by describing the pilot as a mercenary.⁷⁹ The campaign was soon shut down, with the United States embarrassed once again as its involvement in the coup was exposed. The revelation of U.S. involvement also provided Achmed Sukarno, the very person the CIA was attempting to overthrow, the opportunity to extort food and weapons from the U.S. in exchange for silence about the event.⁸⁰
- **CIA in Cuba and the Bay of Pigs (1961)** – Probably the best known of any Cold War UW efforts, this operation ended in failure when Fidel Castro crushed an uprising of Cuban exiles organized by the United States. Grdovic notes that, “operational security in the United States was a complete failure”⁸¹ in the lead up to the operation itself.

⁷⁶ Mark Grdovic, *A Leader's Handbook to Unconventional Warfare* (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, November 2009), 33.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 135.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁸¹ Grdovic, *A Leader's Handbook to Unconventional Warfare*, 34.

- **CIA and Special Forces in North Vietnam (1961–1964)** – Here was another embarrassment for the United States, overshadowed only by the difficulties that would emerge with the escalation of the Vietnam War. The CIA attempted to establish networks in North Vietnam, but only managed to produce an infiltrated operation full of double agents.⁸² Special Forces became involved and helped parachute the agents into North Vietnam.⁸³ Incredibly, after inserting the agents, all support was cut off, with efforts shifting towards information operations aimed at convincing the North Vietnamese that there was a resistance force present amongst its people.⁸⁴
- **CIA and Special Forces in Nicaragua and Honduras (1980–1988)** – Another UW failure, this campaign suffered from a lack of legitimate resistance forces. Grdovic explains that the Contras were more paid mercenaries than actual revolutionaries concerned about their country.⁸⁵ This campaign was also undermined by operational security issues. The Iran-Contra scandal exposed what was supposed to be a covert operation, once again embarrassing the United States and causing it to terminate operations.⁸⁶
- **CIA and Special Forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan (1980–1991)** – This operation resulted in some of the worst long-term consequences of any UW campaign. After the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the U.S. started funneling money, weapons, and training to groups of Islamic freedom fighters known as the mujahedeen. While the mujahedeen successfully engaged the Soviets in a long guerrilla war, the aftermath quickly spun out of control. Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan was plunged into a civil war, with some mujahedeen forming the Taliban and seizing control of the government. The Taliban would eventually welcome Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda (AQ) into the country, allowing Afghanistan to be used as a planning base for the 9/11 attacks. Fifteen years after those attacks, the U.S. remains engaged in Afghanistan, spending money and lives fighting the Taliban.

⁸² Ibid., 35.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

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IV. SPECIAL FORCES MOVES TO OFFENSIVE UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

As the CIA began to wage offensive unconventional warfare against communists, Special Forces' role remained to conduct UW only during a time of war. SF's journey to embrace offensive UW took decades. One sees this transition not only in the changing doctrinal definition of unconventional warfare, but in several key events as well.

A. FROM GUERRILLA WARFARE TO AN OFFENSIVE ASYMMETRIC OPTION

As previously mentioned, after reaching a stalemate with the CIA over roles and responsibilities, SF added the term "unconventional warfare" to their doctrine in 1955. In 1961, the Army associated the relatively new Special Forces with guerrilla warfare, or resistance operations,⁸⁷ reflected in the title of its special operations field manual, *Guerrilla Warfare and Special Operations*. The doctrinal definition of unconventional warfare in this field manual was designed to encompass the entirety of a resistance movement,⁸⁸ to include the underground and auxiliary elements, in addition to the guerrillas:

Unconventional warfare consists of the interrelated fields of guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, and subversion against hostile states (resistance). Unconventional warfare operations are conducted in enemy or enemy controlled territory by predominately indigenous personnel usually supported and directed in varying degrees by an external source.⁸⁹

Additionally, the manual notes that, "guerrilla warfare is the responsibility of the U.S. Army."⁹⁰ A hard line had thus been drawn between the components of a resistance, with Army Special Forces only being expected to work with the guerrilla portion.

⁸⁷ Grdovic, "Unconventional Warfare: The Current Dilemma."

⁸⁸ Aaron Bank conveyed his own concerns over the definition of UW in *From OSS to Green Berets: The Birth of Special Forces*

⁸⁹ Department of the Army, *Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations, Field Manual 31-20* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 1961), 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

In 1965, the Army tried to convey the infeasibility of orchestrating a resistance movement while only being responsible for the guerrillas.⁹¹ Doctrine writers again noted that “guerrilla warfare is the responsibility of the U.S. Army,”⁹² but this time added that “within certain designated geographic areas (guerrilla warfare operational areas), U.S. Army Special Forces must be prepared to assume responsibility for all three interrelated fields of unconventional warfare.”⁹³ The Army was clearly trying to open the door for its Special Forces personnel to be involved in the entirety of a resistance movement, instead of just training guerrilla fighters.

However, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 had already made the Army wary of involving Department of Defense personnel in offensive UW.⁹⁴ In 1964, SF’s involvement in North Vietnam briefly provided two major lessons to the Army: (1) There are prerequisite conditions required for UW, and (2) Waging UW against an *indigenous government* is very different from using UW against a *foreign occupier* (something the CIA learned from its failed efforts).⁹⁵ However, these lessons were quickly forgotten as American involvement in Vietnam increased. Special Forces spent the majority of the war in a counterinsurgency (COIN) role blended with foreign internal defense (FID), while some members of the Special Operations Group (SOG) conducted direct action missions. By the end of the Vietnam War, there was seemingly little to no interest remaining in UW.⁹⁶

For the next 25 years, the doctrinal definition of UW changed very little, continuing to focus predominantly on the guerrilla warfare portion of a resistance movement. However, as the Cold War came to an end, unconventional warfare was given a revised definition and meaning for the Department of Defense. In a 1990 field manual, UW is defined as:

⁹¹ Grdovic, “Unconventional Warfare: The Current Dilemma.”

⁹² Department of the Army, *Special Forces Operations, Field Manual 31-21* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 1965), 5.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Grdovic, “Fundamentals of Unconventional Warfare.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. UW includes guerilla warfare (GW) and other direct offensive low-visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence collection, and evasion and escape (E&E).⁹⁷

The field manual then goes on to list as a *fact* that “SF can conduct UW in conflict or war.”⁹⁸ To ensure that it is clear that SF is now embracing UW outside of declared war, the Field Manual also introduces “Contemporary” UW, a precursor for today’s descriptions of “Modern” UW:

Contemporary UW takes on new significance for several reasons. Historically, SF has focused on UW as an adjunct to general war. However, the new U.S. policy of supporting selected anti-communist resistance movements requires SF to focus on UW during conflicts short of war. Moreover, global urbanization dictates a shift in emphasis from rural GW to all aspects of clandestine resistance.⁹⁹

The 1990 field manual for Special Forces lays claim to SF conducting unconventional warfare in both wartime and in peacetime, and also declares SF capable of conducting UW independent from conventional operations. From the vantage point of this thesis, this marks an important step in SF’s evolving view of UW as an offensive tool.

However, the 1990 manual fails to account for the complexities of the UW mission. It states explicitly that, “SF units do not create resistance movements. They provide advice, training and assistance to indigenous resistance organizations already in existence.”¹⁰⁰ The military viewed UW as a reactive measure, focusing on pockets of resistance that would likely form in crisis areas. The proactive form of UW articulated in the 1990 field manual would require very different procedures, particularly in terms of finding and contacting viable resistance forces. However, even after the 1990 field

⁹⁷ Department of the Army, *Doctrine for Special Forces Operations, Field Manual 31-20* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 20 April 1990), 3-1.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 3-2.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

manual was published, “the corresponding capabilities were not developed due to a lack of understanding of what this [UW outside of declared war] entails.”¹⁰¹

Shortly before the 9/11 attacks, an updated *Special Forces Operations* Field Manual was produced. In it, the definition of UW remains almost identical to the 1990 version, but the 2001 manual pushes the concept of UW even further towards preemptive offensive action. The manual discusses mobilizing a populace against a “hostile government,” in addition to an “occupying power.”¹⁰² The manual distinguishes between partisans and insurgents, with partisans being those resistance members who oppose an occupying power, while insurgents target their efforts at existing governments.¹⁰³ The manual also discusses UW across a broad spectrum of conflict, and notes that it can be used anywhere along that spectrum, thereby reinforcing the idea that SF can (and should) conduct UW in situations short of declared war.

Published only months before 9/11 and the highly publicized SF success stories that would follow, the manual reminds its readers that Army SF has a place in defense strategy as much as conventional forces:

Just as the UW forces of potential adversaries have gained in relevance and importance, so has Army SF—the UW force of the United States. SF provides an effective capability to counter the emerging unconventional threat, as well as an increasingly viable and offensive asymmetric option for employing U.S. military power.¹⁰⁴

With this statement, SF identifies itself not just as the UW force of the Army, or even of the Department of Defense, but as the UW force of the entire United States. This means that after repeatedly changing the definition of unconventional warfare, by 2001 SF was claiming in its doctrine a mission that had traditionally belonged exclusively to the CIA.

¹⁰¹ Grdovic, “Unconventional Warfare: The Current Dilemma.”

¹⁰² Department of the Army, *Special Forces Operations, Field Manual 3-05.20* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 2001), 2-1.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 2-5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-2.

B. SPECIAL FORCES TAKE THE LEAD: AFGHANISTAN, 2001

In the days immediately following 9/11, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld looked to United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and its commander, General Tommy Franks, for a response to the attacks. Franks and his staff quickly realized that they had no existing plans to conduct ground operations in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden and the rest of al-Qaeda were based.¹⁰⁵ While the Department of Defense struggled to find ways to infiltrate Afghanistan, the CIA presented its own plan to President George W. Bush, proposing an unconventional warfare campaign using CIA assets, airpower, special operations teams, and indigenous Afghan forces.¹⁰⁶

CIA operatives received Special Forces Operational Detachment – Alphas (ODAs) on the ground in Afghanistan and linked them up with warlords and fighters from the Northern Alliance. The ODAs, from 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), coordinated airstrikes while accompanying and advising their Afghan partners in battles against al-Qaeda and the Taliban government. The result was a stunning tactical success. Within weeks, the Taliban had been driven from power as bin Laden fled the area and went into hiding.

Back in the United States, the first images from the newly declared “Global War on Terrorism” were riveting. Instead of the stereotypical soldiers with close-cropped hair and matching uniforms being accompanied by armored vehicles and tanks, Americans saw something much different. Green Berets with long hair and shaggy beards, wearing baseball hats instead of helmets and civilian hiking shoes instead of combat boots, rode on horses alongside their Afghan partners. Not only had Special Forces and the CIA successfully overthrown a sitting government, but they had done so with the full approval of the international community.

¹⁰⁵ Donald P. Wright et al. *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM October 2001–September 2005* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003), 41.

¹⁰⁶ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 43–44.

C. OPERATION VIKING HAMMER: UW AS A SUPPORTING EFFORT TO A PREEMPTIVE ATTACK

Before the dust had even settled in Afghanistan, CENTCOM planners were ordered by the Bush Administration to prepare for an invasion of Iraq. Still riding a wave of international support and sympathy from the 9/11 attacks, President Bush declared Iraq as a member of an “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address, and mobilized a “Coalition of the Willing” to support the upcoming invasion.

As part of the plan to invade Iraq, Task Force (TF) VIKING was assembled to tie up Iraqi forces north of Baghdad, while conventional forces invaded from the south.¹⁰⁷ TF VIKING was a massive undertaking, infiltrating 42 ODAs into northern Iraq, most of them from 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne).¹⁰⁸ The ODAs quickly linked up with Kurdish forces and, after defeating Ansar al Islam irregulars, seized the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. While American news networks focused mainly on the conventional assault force coming in through southern Iraq, TF VIKING proved to be yet another success-against-all-odds story for Special Forces. Making use of roughly 50,000 Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, TF VIKING effectively neutralized 13 Iraqi divisions and took two of the largest cities in Iraq.¹⁰⁹

D. UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE MEETS THE BUSH DOCTRINE

The success of SF in Afghanistan and Iraq reinvigorated discussions about UW, and what SF’s UW role should be. In 2003, the definition of UW remained very similar to its 1990 and 2001 versions:

A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, predominantly conducted through, with, or by indigenous or surrogate forces organized, trained, equipped, supported and directed in varying degrees by an external source. UW includes, but is not limited to, guerrilla warfare

¹⁰⁷ Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 299.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Grdovic, “Lessons from TF 103 in Northern Iraq 2002–2003” (unpublished paper written in August 2015, distributed to students at the Naval Postgraduate School in September 2015 as part of Professor Doowan Lee’s Resistance Seminar), 3–4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

(GW), sabotage, subversion, intelligence activities, and unconventional assisted recovery (UAR).¹¹⁰

One difference in context, however, is that the United States was on a warpath in 2003. The Bush Administration's response to 9/11 had become heavily influenced by a group of neoconservatives whose philosophy was centered around utilizing preemptive force to promote American values around the globe.¹¹¹ This thinking found favor with President Bush, and became enshrined in the 2002 National Security Strategy. What became known as the "Bush Doctrine" lent primacy to preemptive warfare—waging war against state and non-state actors in order to prevent them from attacking the United States first. "Waging preventive war to overthrow recalcitrant regimes and free the oppressed—this had become the definitive expression of America's calling."¹¹²

Of course, freeing the oppressed is what the Special Forces Regiment is supposed to be all about. Yet, after the successful invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rebuilding of each country took a dark turn. Insurgencies blossomed and networks of irregulars, generally described as "terrorists" by the American government, began launching attacks on civilians and deployed American troops. As the Department of Defense and the conventional military struggled to (re)learn counterinsurgency, elements of the SOF community that specialized in counterterrorism (CT) techniques found their niche. Kinetic, direct action operations emerged as the preferred mission across SOF, to include for Green Berets whose role had previously been envisioned as that of trainers and advisors as opposed to "door kickers" and assault troops.

Observing how various SOF elements were likely to continue to be employed in the Global War on Terror, discussions began at the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) about whether the definition of unconventional warfare needed to be clarified. Mark Grdovic notes that leaders in the Special Forces community worried that SF was being pushed to the side as the wars in Afghanistan and

¹¹⁰ Department of the Army, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare Options, Field Manual 3-05.201* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, April 2003), 1-1.

¹¹¹ Andrew Bacevich gives a helpful history of the neoconservative movement and its rise to influence in the Bush administration in Chapter 3 of his book, *The New American Militarism*.

¹¹² Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.

Iraq increasingly focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, and as other SOF elements grew in prominence:

Despite a long resume of experience in COIN and CT (Vietnam, El Salvador, the Philippines, etc.), many in the SF community saw the lack of pending UW missions in the next stages of the Global War On Terror as a risk to the continued relevance of SF. This thinking was the catalyst for the flawed arguments to change UW to include operations against terrorists and insurgents. This perspective failed to account for existing charter that included CT and FID (to include COIN) as primary missions for SF, as well as a misunderstanding of the environmental conditions and associated activities required to conduct UW successfully. Leaders in the community became more interested in figuring out how to relabel these types of efforts as UW and claim a proprietary ownership to the methodology of working alongside irregular forces.¹¹³

Instead of focusing on what SF could do to contribute in a CT or COIN campaign, leaders tried to find ways to make UW fit within the CT plan against al-Qaeda.¹¹⁴ In theory, this would bring SF back to the center of the conversation, since SF now claimed itself to be the country's UW force. However, instead of clarifying SF's role under the Bush Doctrine, reconceiving UW simply generated more debate. Proponents saw UW as a more appropriate way to wage the CT fight, while opponents began to ask what, if anything, actually differentiated UW from CT.¹¹⁵

All of this was occurring during a time when many in the military community came to view the preemptive offense embodied by the Bush Doctrine as the new norm. America had been attacked, there were two wars underway, and a nearly blank check had been given to the military to wage those wars.¹¹⁶ As the different branches of the military sought continued relevance and funding, each sought to stay as involved as possible in the ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

¹¹³ Mark Grdovic, email message to author, 30 September 2016.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ David M. Walker, "Global War on Terrorism: Observations on Funding, Costs, and Future Commitments," testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives, published by the U.S. Government Accountability Office on 18 July 2006, <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-06-885T>.

Meanwhile, in 2007, the definition of UW was changed again. To try and make UW more relevant to the ongoing counterterrorism and counterinsurgency fights, the definition became, “Operations conducted by, with, or through irregular forces in support of a resistance movement, an insurgency, or conventional military operations.”¹¹⁷ Proponents of this new definition, which now included “irregular forces,” hoped that this would put SF back in the lead.¹¹⁸ Working with irregular forces is a hallmark of the Green Berets. However, this latest version of the definition also included conventional military operations, which allowed UW to apply to nearly any operation being executed with a partner force.

As a result, other SOF units began to add UW to the lists of *their* core tasks. The reality at the time was that nearly every military element deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq was working with surrogates in one form or another, to include the conventional military. For instance, when the Sunni Awakening began in Iraq in 2007, conventional infantry units found themselves working with Sunni militias—or irregulars. This meant that, according to the doctrinal definition of UW, regular infantry units were conducting UW on a daily basis.

Interestingly, the 2007 definition of UW was internally produced and never approved by the Army doctrine writers at Ft. Leavenworth.¹¹⁹ It was eventually rescinded, but caused considerable, lasting damage. For instance, in 2016, while attending a Naval War College course for joint accreditation, my class received a capabilities brief for U.S. Navy SEALs. Despite the SEALs being a force primarily dedicated to maritime interdiction, the capabilities brief listed unconventional warfare as one of their core competencies. According to the 2007 definition, SEALs too could claim unconventional warfare as an area of expertise after working extensively with Iraqi and Afghan partner units.

¹¹⁷ Department of the Army, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare, Field Manual 3-05.201* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 28 September 2007).

¹¹⁸ Grdovic, email message to author.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

E. THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF UW EMERGES

In 2009 came a new American foreign policy. President Barack Obama was elected to office, having run on the promise to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to avoid committing U.S. troops and resources to messy nation-building campaigns. President Obama's campaign promises were a direct repudiation of the Bush Doctrine.

Already, USASOC had begun to realize its 2007 definition of UW was causing major issues. The constant reinterpretation of UW was costing the force clarity. In response, a working group of about 10 people was formed to try and re-clarify the definition once and for all.¹²⁰ The result of the working group's effort is reflected in the current joint doctrinal definition of UW: Activities to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating with an underground, auxiliary, or guerrilla force in a denied area.

Members of the working group crafted their definition to include only very specific activities, limiting what could be considered unconventional warfare. Emphasis was instead placed on the purpose of unconventional warfare. However, their definition still showed traces of the preemptive warfare thinking that had dominated the Global War on Terror strategy for nearly a decade. The new definition restored the UW partner force to being a resistance movement or insurgency, and utilized language that allowed for the use of offensive unconventional warfare. By stating that the goal was to “coerce, disrupt, or *overthrow* an occupying power or government,” the definition allowed for the possibility that UW could be used as a tool for preemptive regime change against an undesirable government, which rendered it nearly identical in concept to the CIA's covert operations during the Cold War.

The language used in the definition is just ambiguous enough that if one wants to engage in Jedburgh-style unconventional warfare, one can focus on an *occupying power*

¹²⁰ Ibid.

as the target of UW. However, one sovereign nation rarely invades and occupies another in today's world.¹²¹ This leads to greater focus on the words *overthrow* and *government*.

Some members of the working group thought the inclusion of the word *overthrow* would be politically disastrous.¹²² The more palatable trio of “coerce, disrupt, or *defeat*” was suggested instead, but *defeat* was determined to be too difficult to quantify.¹²³ Consequently, *overthrow* was used, helping to form the perception that SF, the UW force of the United States, exists to utilize proxy forces to overthrow sitting governments.

Ironically, had this same definition been produced in 2003 or 2004, it would have fit perfectly with the American foreign policy mindset at the time. However, generating it in 2009 yielded the opposite: the Obama Administration entered office looking to avoid military conflict, not to start it. USASOC had just defined the parameters of a task that nobody in the Obama Administration seemed eager to embrace. When one considers some of the problems that have emerged in the wake of offensive unconventional warfare (as described in Chapter II), the Obama Administration's hesitation should not be surprising.

¹²¹ The major exception to this observation is of course the Russian annexation of Crimea, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

¹²² Mark Grdovic, phone conversation with author, 18 November 2016.

¹²³ Ibid.

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V. PROBLEMS WITH OFFENSIVE UW AND UW IN THE GRAY ZONE

Any military officer can almost certainly quote the tired and overused Clausewitz phrase that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” It is a simple and obvious statement, especially when looking at an American-style democracy. The role of senior military leaders is to provide sound advice about how to prosecute wars. The military does not decide when and where to wage those war, but is instead directed by its civilian (and political) masters.

For instance, if the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff entered the Oval Office and advocated for using a nuclear first-strike option to deal with the Syrian Civil War or Russian aggression in Ukraine, he would not only be laughed out of the room, but likely relieved of his duties for providing poor advice. It seems a ridiculous scenario, but illustrates how the Chairman and other senior military leaders must provide valid and feasible options in order to have their advice listened to and considered by civilian policymakers. Consequently, two questions the material presented thus far should raise are: With unconventional warfare’s long history of embarrassing failures, is it a feasible option to present? Should a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff walk into the Oval Office and confidently recommend UW as a policy option?

To properly analyze the problems posed by unconventional warfare as a modern-day policy option, we must split UW into two types. This thesis has referred to the first type as *offensive UW*—coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing a government without declaring war in order to further the interests of the United States. This includes discussions about UW in the “gray zone.” The second type pertains to the execution of UW during a declared conflict or war. One might call this *defensive UW*, so long as the United States is responding to an aggressor or occupying power.

A. THE COVERT PROBLEM

Most historical examples listed in UW manuals are actually CIA covert operations, meant to conceal U.S. sponsorship. This raises several questions. First,

whether UW has to be covert in nature. If the answer to that question is yes, it raises the subsequent question: is the Department of Defense capable of conducting covert action?

1. Does It Have to Be Covert?

The Joint Publication on UW states that, “UW requires a varying mix of clandestine and overt sponsor activities and *may* require covert activities to hide the role of the USG as the sponsor.”¹²⁴ The problem with this statement is the fact that nearly every past UW campaign conducted outside a theater of war began as a covert operation.

In accordance with today’s definition, the purpose of UW in an offensive scenario would be to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow another government. Exposing U.S. sponsorship of these activities when the U.S. has not declared war has been, and will continue to be, massively embarrassing for the United States. The U.S. projects itself around the world as a promoter of democracy and contends that people should have the right to choose their own government. If the U.S. is caught interfering in someone else’s government, that makes the “shining city on the hill” narrative much harder to sustain.

Russia is currently providing an example of what happens when you get caught coercing or disrupting another government. On 07 October 2016, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence released a statement directly accusing the Russian government of orchestrating a string of email hacks on high-level political organizations and persons.¹²⁵ It has now become apparent that Russia worked directly with Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks to release those hacked emails in a manner that undermined the 2016 presidential election by attempting to sow doubts in the minds of the American populace about their political process.

The email leaks were aimed exclusively at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the campaign staff of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Democrats, however, were not the only ones to express their outrage over Russian intervention.

¹²⁴ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-05.1*, I-6. Emphasis added.

¹²⁵ Director of National Intelligence, “Joint Statement from the Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 07 October 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/215-press-releases-2016/1423-joint-dhs-odni-election-security-statement>.

Neoconservatives like Max Boot and Bill Kristol, proponents of U.S. intervention abroad, have expressed their outrage over Russia's attempt to coerce and disrupt the U.S. government.¹²⁶ Republican Senators Ben Sasse and Marco Rubio also denounced the WikiLeaks attacks, and called on their party to do the same.

Now, imagine that the situation was reversed. Say the U.S. decided to do in Russia what it did in Italy in the late 1940s. What would the international response be if Russia's intelligence agencies traced email hacks and political interference back to the United States? Could the U.S. president continue to travel the world advocating for free elections and democracy if the U.S. was exposed as having actively interfered in someone else's political process?

Arguably, this is already happening. The U.S. executed regime changes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya over the past 15 years, yet still lays claim to the moral high ground internationally. The problems that can emerge from this claim can be seen in Turkish President Recep Erdogan's response to U.S. efforts trying to keep Turkey from becoming overly involved in the battle for Mosul. "Erdogan noted that some countries were telling Turkey . . . to stay out. Yet, despite not having history in the region or connection to it, these same countries were 'coming and going.' 'Did Saddam [Hussein] tell the United States to come to Iraq 14 years ago?' he added."¹²⁷

The consequences of getting caught conducting unconventional warfare and manipulating other governments all but confirm that UW has to be covert if it is to be successfully executed outside the bounds of declared war. This leads to the next problem—can the Department of Defense effectively conduct covert operations without being discovered?

¹²⁶ While Kristol has written articles on WikiLeaks in the conservative journal *The Weekly Standard* and Boot has contributed his thoughts to USA Today, both have actively criticized the WikiLeaks attacks through their Twitter accounts (@BillKristol and @MaxBoot) and also called on Republican officials to do the same.

¹²⁷ Nick Danforth, "Turkey's New Maps Are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire," *Foreign Policy*, 23 October 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/23/turkeys-religious-nationalists-want-ottoman-borders-iraq-erdogan/?wp_login_redirect=0.

2. Everybody Wants a Book Deal

When President Obama announced to the world that Osama bin Laden had been killed in a raid, his speech did no more than acknowledge that the raid was executed by “a small team of Americans.”¹²⁸ Yet, within 24 hours, leaks were emerging from the White House that a group from SEAL Team Six was responsible.

As details of the story continued to emerge, it was not only learned that SEAL Team Six executed the raid, but that the assault force had been hand-picked from within the unit.¹²⁹ The assaulters on this mission were supposed to be quite literally the “best of the best.” SEAL Team Six itself is one of the most secretive units in the United States military. Surely operational security could be ensured by hand-picking the assault force and including only the most mature and professional operators.

However, just over a year after the raid, assaulter Matt Bissonnette published his book, *No Easy Day*, under the pseudonym Mark Owen. The book was a tell-all about the raid and was immediately controversial since it came from a community that is supposed to value quiet professionalism. Not to be outdone, fellow-SEAL Robert O’Neill had to tell his story to *Esquire* magazine and the Fox News Channel, and is now earning his livelihood as a paid speaker who talks about his career as a SEAL and as “the man who killed bin Laden.”

O’Neill and Bissonnette both claim that they just want the public to know the truth in response to controlled leaks of information from the Obama Administration, to include cooperation with filmmakers on the production of *Zero Dark Thirty*.¹³⁰ Yet their inability to keep silent raises an important question—does the U.S. military possess the

¹²⁸ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Osama Bin Laden” (speech, East Room, White House, 02 May 2011), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead>.

¹²⁹ Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: New American Library, 2012).

¹³⁰ Forrest S. Crowell, *Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional* (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015). Crowell’s thesis covers how publicity has affected the Navy SEAL community over the last decade and provides an excellent study of how a community committed to secrecy has struggled to remain in the shadows.

capability to execute a covert operation without its participants talking about it afterwards?

While it is impossible to prove that the military cannot find individuals capable of conducting a covert operation and remaining silent, one needs only to peruse the “Military” section in any Barnes and Nobles bookstore to find dozens of tell-all memoirs written by the special operations community. The number of special operations personnel without a Facebook page or Twitter account is dwindling. The Special Forces battalion that I was previously assigned to has its own Facebook page, open to the public, despite containing pictures of members of the unit and their families. Websites like SOFREP.com and Facebook’s Operator As F*** have emerged, giving special operations personnel forums in which they talk about their exploits and complain about current government and military leaders.¹³¹ Should civilian leaders who might be looking for an organization to conduct covert unconventional warfare be wary of selecting military personnel from units that have developed a reputation for violating the quiet professional principle?

B. THE AMERICAN VALUES PROBLEM

George Marshall’s objection to having the State Department run covert operations was his belief that any ability to conduct diplomacy would be compromised by his organization’s meddling in other governments’ affairs. He feared that the U.S. would be seen as promoting a certain set of values abroad, while executing operations that directly conflicted with those same values.

Alberto Coll and Richard Shultz link this concern to principles espoused by the Founding Fathers: “Although they established the nation on the doctrine of universal natural rights, they did not believe that our foreign policy should seek to transform all those nations that did not accept this as the basis of government.”¹³² They note that *the*

¹³¹ See www.SOFREP.com or www.facebook.com/operatorasF.

¹³² Alberto R. Coll and Richard H. Shultz Jr., “Can American Democracy Employ Covert Action as an Instrument of Statecraft?” *International Law Studies* 67, no. 1 (1995): 4, 343.

fundamental American principle is that everyone is equal, so no one has the right to dictate what form of government another person should live under.¹³³

Tellingly, while he was initially a proponent of unconventional warfare, George Kennan ultimately dismissed it as being in direct violation of American principles.¹³⁴ George Ball likewise expressed his concern that if the U.S. participated in unconventional warfare, it would be no different than the Soviet Union.¹³⁵ Ball explicitly lists “noninterference in the affairs of other nations, respect for their sovereignty and self-determination” as some of the important American principles that would be compromised by conducting unconventional warfare.¹³⁶

The counterargument to this concern over American values was presented to President Eisenhower in a report from Lieutenant General James Doolittle in 1954.¹³⁷ The “Doolittle Standard” declared that communism (and by extension the Soviet Union) posed an existential threat to the United States, therefore no rules should apply in combatting it.¹³⁸ This “standard” is said to have been the justification used by Eisenhower and subsequent presidents when they assented to unconventional warfare.

It is impossible to determine whether the formation of communist governments in Third World countries posed a true existential threat to the United States, since relatively few succumbed to communism. However, trying to apply the Doolittle Standard today does not seem to work. Russia remains an adversary of the United States, but appears to be more focused on gaining influence in Eastern Europe and parts of the Middle East than militarily threatening the U.S. Radical Islamic terrorism has resulted in the tragic death of American citizens, but has never actually threatened the existence of the United States. An argument can be made that today’s international stage simply does not justify the United States disregarding its own values in order to save itself from perceived extermination.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 329.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 337–338.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

C. THE GRAY ZONE

A white paper published in 2015 by U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) described the gray zone as consisting of “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.”¹³⁹ The paper goes on to quote John F. Kennedy’s address to the graduating class of West Point in 1962, when he described a “type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, despite the recent emergence of the term, the gray zone is nothing new, and has been around for quite some time (or at least since 1962). In fact, conducting unconventional warfare in the gray zone has been occurring since the start of the Cold War. Indeed, the Cold War itself can be described as almost exclusively a gray zone competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, with unconventional warfare in the Third World serving as both countries’ weapon of choice. The use of UW was meant to avoid conflict spilling out of the gray zone and into a full-blown conventional or nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviets.

One problem that arises from conducting UW in the gray zone is that the consequences of the action are unpredictable. For instance, the CIA’s support of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan is often cited as a successful case of gray zone UW; the usual contention is that it began “a chain of events that eventually resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.”¹⁴¹ However, as previously mentioned, this chain of events *also* resulted in creating a safe-haven for al-Qaeda, from where AQ planned its attacks against the United States, in addition to setting the conditions for what has become the longest war in U.S. history. In other words, and as this “success” reveals, the second and third order effects of coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing other governments cannot be predicted, and have historically resulted in the creation of more

¹³⁹ United States Special Operations Command, “The Gray Zone” (white paper, 09 September 2015), 1.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Joseph Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 80 (1st Quarter 2016): 104.

problems for the United States. Indeed, “from the perspective of the assistance providers, unexpected outcomes are the rule rather than the exception.”¹⁴²

Often, arguments for UW in the gray zone end up contradicting themselves. As an example, while addressing the historical failures of UW, Will Irwin notes that, “proactive political and unconventional warfare can be enormously effective in furthering U.S. interests. History shows, on the other hand, that limited, reactive, poorly timed, non-wartime UW efforts rarely succeed.”¹⁴³ This quote appears at the beginning of a paper that argues *for* unconventional warfare preparations within the gray zone—that period of time that does not constitute “wartime”—even though, *non*-wartime is the very time when UW is most likely to fail. Additionally, the Jedburghs were successful despite conducting operations that were both limited and reactive.

The prescriptive analysis portion of Irwin’s argument nevertheless still has merit, especially when he considers the analysis required to prepare for UW:

Because timing plays such a decisively important role in UW, the ability to recognize and act upon indicators of UW windows of opportunity is imperative. This calls for an estimative intelligence capability focused specifically on structured and continual analysis of the prospects for or existence of internal dissent in the face of authoritarian rule. We must become much better at not only recognizing the conditions for domestic unrest (the *potential* for state instability), but at detecting the presence of nascent clandestine opposition, the emerging shape and scope of that opposition, the character and agenda of its leadership, the substance of its narrative, and the pace and trajectory of its development. An early and growing in-depth understanding of such a movement can help determine if a benefactor-proxy relationship would serve U.S. interests.¹⁴⁴

Irwin argues that by proactively understanding and identifying the *potential* for unconventional warfare, senior leaders can better equip themselves to “sell unconventional warfare as a viable foreign policy option in a given situation.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Antonio Giustozzi and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Missions of Modernity: Advisory Missions and the Struggle for Hegemony in Afghanistan and Beyond* (New York: Hurst, 2016), 344.

¹⁴³ Will Irwin, “A Comprehensive Approach to Unconventional Warfare” (occasional paper, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida: JSOU Press, May 2016), 2.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

Irwin continues his argument for proactive, preparatory UW by echoing Kermit Roosevelt's explanation for success in TPAJAX: thorough and detailed analysis of the target population, with a solid understanding of the society itself.¹⁴⁶ This involves "mapping the human terrain," or identifying all of the factions that exist within a population:

Religious sects and factions, diaspora populations, kinship networks, human rights groups, the urban poor and other underprivileged and neglected population groups, political constituencies, the media, economic and trade elites, corruption victim groups, political activists, women's rights groups, trade unions, teacher associations, student activist groups, veterans' organizations, and activist clergy groups. Simmering ethnic, clan, or geographical tensions and rivalries need to be fully appreciated.¹⁴⁷

To accomplish this, a never-ending process of analysis must be used to continuously update the United States' understanding of vulnerable populations. Such ethnographic sensing would also allow "discrete contact with an inchoate movement—still in the latent and incipient stages of development," in order to begin shaping the movement into the United States' desired resistance.¹⁴⁸

On paper, preparatory actions for resistance make sense. By the time one reaches the moment of decision for initiating an unconventional warfare campaign or operation, it is too late to successfully conduct preparatory actions to understand a target population. However, the feasibility of the United States conducting this preparation continuously around the world is doubtful.

Historian Max Boot and former Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick point out that the U.S. military's largest current deficit is its "lack of knowledge about other cultures."¹⁴⁹ Even specially selected and trained SOF personnel are faced with a potentially

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 4; for a more expansive look at ethnographic sensing, see Varman S. Chhoeung and Chad T. Machiela, *Beyond Lawrence: Ethnographic Intelligence for USSOCOM* (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2009).

¹⁴⁹ Max Boot and Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Uncle Sam Wants Tu," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2005, <http://www.cfr.org/defense-budget/uncle-sam-wants-tu/p7861>.

insurmountable obstacle: with rare exception, they are outsiders attempting to understand and then coerce or influence a population to which they do not belong.

In order to assist a movement or social network in another country, a third party must cultivate at least some level of trust, to include *person-based* trust.¹⁵⁰ To build person-based trust, communication and similarity are two important factors.¹⁵¹ In other words, if you speak the language and look like the person you are dealing with, you have a better chance of quickly building trust with that person.

While history contains examples of outsiders like Edward Lansdale or T. E. Lawrence successfully influencing local populations despite their status as foreigners (or in Lansdale's case, his lack of language ability), tasking U.S. SOF to actively and continuously map human networks, cultivate social movements, and build resistance groups in the gray zone may be a step too far. The difficulty in accomplishing this mission is further exacerbated by the fact that the U.S. has built a special operations community that is overwhelmingly white and male.¹⁵² Within Special Forces, the unit that would be expected to conduct this preparation, roughly 85% of the officers and enlisted men are white.¹⁵³

This puts SF personnel at a severe disadvantage if they were to attempt to map human networks or cultivate movements in vulnerable populations in regions like the Middle East. When competing for trust and influence among Arabs, it is reasonable to conclude that white, Christian American SF personnel would not gain as much traction as, say, Americans of Arab, North African, or Muslim descent. At least the latter would be able to point to a shared region and religion, as opposed to the white Christian who grew up in the suburbs of Dallas. Again, this is far different from what was asked of the multi-national Jedburgh teams, or the Eastern European Lodge Act Soldiers who made up the bulk of 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) during the early days of the Cold War.

¹⁵⁰ Timothy Ball, "Bringing the Alliance Back to SOF: The Role of NATO Special Operations Headquarters in Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare," *JSOU Report 16-4: 2016 Special Operations Essays* (MacDill Air Force Base: JSOU Press, 2016), 15–16.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Tom Vanden Brook, "Pentagon's Elite Forces Lack Diversity," *USA Today*, 06 August 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/08/05/diversity-seals-green-berets/31122851/>.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

Those units consisted of members who were from the country or region in which they would have worked, and spoke the language, giving them a head start in building rapport with resistance forces or members of the local population.

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VI. DEFENSIVE UW: JUSTIFIED, BUT STILL MESSY

The case against offensive unconventional warfare seems clear given its history. However, the question of whether there is a role for defensive UW remains open. For instance, what if a U.S. ally were suddenly occupied by another country? What if another government reacted to domestic protests by using its military to slaughter innocent and defenseless civilians? Could the U.S. effectively employ unconventional warfare to counter these actions, and to help “free the oppressed?” In these scenarios, UW would not have to be covert. Nor would American values be compromised. There would be no gray zone. The U.S. would be justified in its actions.

Two such scenarios can be found in the recent actions of Syrian president Bashar al Assad and in those by Russian president Vladimir Putin. Assad’s response to protests in his country ignited a civil war, which is today approaching its sixth year. The resulting chaos allowed ISIS to expand out of Iraq and seize terrain in Syria. Meanwhile, Putin’s seizure of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent sponsorship of the war in Donbass signaled to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that Russia would not tolerate its eastward expansion, and also augured the possibility of similar actions against NATO’s Baltic State members.

As the Syrian Civil War began, President Obama’s advisors described the opposition as being drawn from “the ranks of ordinary citizens,”¹⁵⁴ which presented what seemed to be the perfect opportunity to utilize unconventional warfare. UW would be ideal for assisting an oppressed population against a dictator who proved increasingly willing to kill his own citizens in order to retain power. Yet, Obama declined to initiate an unconventional warfare campaign, saying later that, “The notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

There are indications that Obama's reluctance was based in part on a historical analysis conducted by the CIA in 2012. As the Obama Administration grappled with how to proceed in dealing with Syria (note: this was before ISIS had re-emerged as a major player in the conflict), the CIA delivered a report to the White House that concluded that training and arming rebel forces usually results in failure.¹⁵⁶ So, what problems might arise from conducting a form of justified, defensive UW in a place like Syria or the Baltics?

A. THE DAY AFTER PROBLEM

In a recent interview, President Obama stated that the worst mistake of his presidency was “failing to plan for the day after . . . in intervening in Libya.”¹⁵⁷ This was an astonishing admission, given that the United States had spent the last 15 years watching Afghanistan and Iraq devolve into chaos thanks to the lack of a plan for “the day after.” UW doctrine actually covers the importance of “the day after” in its 7th phase—Transition—acknowledging that volatility will likely exist:

There are no assurances, once U.S. objectives are achieved, that the resistance has also achieved its objectives, and is ready to cease hostilities . . . When the objectives include removing the hostile government or occupying power entirely, the U.S. support to the new government transitions from UW to stability operations and possibly to FID (foreign internal defense) or COIN (counterinsurgency). FID, or COIN is applied only if the ousted governing body starts its own resistance campaign against the newly formed transitional government. At this point, it is critical to shift efforts from defeating the adversary regime to protecting the newly installed government and its security personnel from insurgency, lawlessness, and subversion by former regime elements that attempt to organize resistance.¹⁵⁸

While the joint publication focuses on “former regime elements,” it fails to mention the possibility that external third parties may challenge the new government.

¹⁵⁶ Mark Mazzetti, “CIA Study of Covert Aid Fueled Skepticism about Helping Rebels,” *New York Times*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/15/us/politics/cia-study-says-arming-rebels-seldom-works.html>.

¹⁵⁷ Allie Malloy and Catherin Treyz, “Obama Admits Worst Mistake of His Presidency,” CNN, 11 April 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/10/politics/obama-libya-biggest-mistake/>.

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-05.1*, II-20.

Yet, this is precisely what was seen when Iranian-sponsored groups launched their own insurgencies in Iraq after the U.S. invasion.

The joint publication is quick to point out that transition only occurs after a “UW operation or campaign that proceeds to the complete overthrow of a government or the ousting of an occupying power.”¹⁵⁹ If the purpose of conducting UW is limited to coercing or disrupting, then transition may not happen at all. The joint publication underscores this argument by suggesting that any relationship with resistance elements can simply be terminated, sent into dormancy, or given to other agencies within the U.S. government.

History has revealed the transition phase to be the most difficult, and likely the most important, phase of a conflict. For instance, TPAJAX’s transition plan installed a leader who was viewed as an American puppet by his own people. Operational planners failed to consider the long-term effects of overthrowing a democratically elected government, leading to an eventual revolution against the Shah. Likewise, those behind PBSUCCESS failed to account for the consolidation of power and the oppression of the Guatemalan people that occurred in the subsequent years.

As for the joint publication’s claim that relationships with insurgents can simply be terminated or laid to rest, a very recent example reminds us of the dangers involved in abandoning a resistance after you have cultivated it. In the months following 1991’s First Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush publicly called for the Iraqi people to rise up in rebellion against Saddam Hussein. Kurdish and Shia forces heeded this call and attempted to oust the Baathist regime, only to have the United States pull its support. Hussein crushed both insurgencies, creating a Kurdish exodus that the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees at the time called the largest in its 40-year history.¹⁶⁰ The U.S. then spent the next 12 years enforcing no-fly zones over Northern and Southern

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Dave Johns, “The Crimes of Saddam Hussein: Suppression of the 1991 Uprising,” PBS *FRONTLINE/World* video, 24 January 2006, http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq501/events_uprising.html.

Iraq, spending money and resources to prevent Saddam Hussein from completely exterminating what remained of the resistance Washington had encouraged.

Admittedly, “the day after” problem is not limited to unconventional warfare, but is applicable to any type of U.S. intervention. The inability to predict what will take the place of a deposed government continues to plague policy makers and academic scholars, and has been said to have paralyzed the Obama Administration’s current response to the Syrian crisis. Harvard professor Stephen Walt summarizes some of the rationale for not intervening:

In particular, I’ve yet to see any of the advocates of intervention lay out a plausible blueprint for a post-civil war political order in Syria and a plausible path for getting there. The United States remains committed to dismantling Bashar al-Assad’s regime (for reasons that are not hard to understand), but we lack a serious notion of what will replace it. Needless to say, this was the key omission when we invaded Iraq and when we helped topple Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya: Getting rid of the bad guy and his henchman was the easy part, but we hadn’t the foggiest notion of what to put in their place.¹⁶¹

Despite the degree to which transition challenges should be a major source of concern for decision makers, some advocates attempt to sell UW by simply ignoring the requirement for transition altogether. In a recent article advocating for UW in the gray zone, two members of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) write that “UW provides the U.S. with the capability to deal with a foreign adversary without having to own the foreign terrain and the associated entanglements after the conflict is over.”¹⁶² Yet, as already noted, unconventional warfare doctrine acknowledges that “associated entanglements” occupy an entire phase of UW operations. Even if it were the intent of the U.S. to simply walk away, this does not mean that others, either participants or opponents, would allow that to happen in a clean and simple manner.

¹⁶¹ Stephen M. Walt, “The Great Myth about U.S. Intervention in Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, 24 October 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/24/the-great-myth-about-u-s-intervention-in-syria-iraq-afghanistan-rwanda/?utm_content=buffer5d844&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

¹⁶² Jennifer A. Obernier and Frank N. Saunders, “Enabling Unconventional Warfare to Address Grey Zone Conflicts,” *Small Wars Journal*, 28 September 2016, 1.

Reviewing some of the arguments for nation-building helps illustrate additional complexities and pitfalls inherent to “the day after” problem. For instance, in a 2016 article, Max Boot and Michael Miklaucic write that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) should be reconfigured in order to nation-build across the world in troubled countries.¹⁶³ Boot and Miklaucic also move beyond the goal of promulgating “American democracy for all.” They admit that democracy itself is a “luxury good in the developing world.”¹⁶⁴ Consequently, they argue that the United States should be comfortable supporting or even building autocratic governments as long as those autocrats behave in a responsible manner.¹⁶⁵

Boot doubles down on this argument in a recent article in *Commentary* magazine, contending that the U.S. is a “nation-builder in denial,” and that more positive results would have occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan had the U.S. kept troops there for an indefinite period of time.¹⁶⁶ However, Boot’s main point in his article is to praise another article that promotes nation-building, written by Nobel Prize-winning economist Roger B. Myerson and State Department official Kael Weston. Curiously, Myerson and Weston open their argument for nation-building by *contradicting* Boot and Miklaucic, while also explaining why the U.S. cannot simply install a leader of its choice as it tried to do in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s:

Trying to install some friendly autocrat after a U.S. intervention won’t work anymore: It would stoke distrust, invite uprisings, increase tensions with other major powers, and alarm many Americans unwilling to get into the business of permanent occupation. U.S. interests are better served by cultivating legitimate leaders. Today, successful state-building means democratic state-building.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Max Boot, Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick, and Michael Miklaucic, “Reconfiguring USAID for State-Building” (policy innovation memorandum no. 57, Council on Foreign Relations, June 2016), <http://www.cfr.org/foreign-aid/reconfiguring-usaid-state-building/p37869>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Max Boot, “America: A Nation-Builder in Denial,” *Commentary*, 27 October 2016, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/america-a-nation-building-denial/>.

¹⁶⁷ Roger B. Myerson and J. Kael Weston, “5 Rules to Get State-Building Right,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 October 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/five-rules-to-get-state-building-right-1476985296>.

Myerson and Weston do not pretend that nation-building can happen without a serious expansion of government and budgets. Instead, they advise the U.S. to “staff up” and create “a new agency devoted explicitly to state-building missions.”¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, their solution on funding is to suggest that the new agency’s budget could be “offset with contributions from NATO and other allies.”¹⁶⁹ Exactly how the United States might convince NATO allies (many of whom struggle to even meet their own obligations to NATO) to fund U.S. nation-building ventures around the world remains unaddressed in the article. Regardless, if the U.S. chooses to conduct UW, it seems likely that a serious investment and possible expansion of government would be necessary for the sole purpose of addressing the transition phase. However, even if this was done, no level of investment or infrastructure can guarantee predictable behavior from the proxy force.

B. THE “WHO ARE WE WORKING WITH?” PROBLEM—MORAL ISSUES

The current joint publication on unconventional warfare spends roughly two pages on transition issues in its “Planning” section, including “Notional Transition Lines of Effort in Unconventional Warfare.” Here, responsibility for governance is supposed to shift from local organizations to an established and functioning national government, while economic development is expected to expand from local markets to formal regional integration.¹⁷⁰ Although the difficulties associated with each can be observed in Iraq and Afghanistan, even more germane to this thesis is another line of effort: the transition of the guerrilla into a soldier in a professional security force.

During Robin Sage, the culminating exercise of the Special Forces Qualification Course, a popular scenario is presented to students as they train their guerrillas. The scenario varies from class to class, but the general script involves the guerrillas conducting, or attempting to conduct, a human rights violation. Often, a “captured pilot” is dragged into the “G-Base,” and the guerrillas are eager to conduct a public execution.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-05.1*, V-7.

Alternatively, students might be confronted by a guerrilla attempting to torture a prisoner to elicit timely intelligence.

Regardless of the scenario, a solution usually is quickly reached. My own team had parachuted into the exercise with pre-made “Laws of Land Warfare” cards. We handed these out to our guerrillas and then conducted a short class. There were minor objections and some accusations of hypocrisy (U.S. detainees in Guantanamo were the subject of choice), but in the end, our conveniently compliant guerrillas agreed to behave like professional soldiers.

In the real world, working with indigenous forces is not so easy. In late 2015, a small scandal erupted as news emerged that two Special Forces soldiers had been disciplined for beating up a local Afghan security forces commander. The Green Berets had discovered a litany of abuses conducted by their partner force: a militia commander had raped a 14-year old girl, and was subsequently “punished” by serving only one day in jail before being required to marry the victim.¹⁷¹ Other commanders stole money, raped their way through villages, and conducted “honor killings” of their own daughters.¹⁷² The issues were raised through the chain of command, but the Special Forces team was told leave local grievances alone, and to allow the locals to resolve them.¹⁷³

The breaking point came as the Green Berets were informed that one of their militia commanders had kidnapped a young boy from a local village, chained him to a bed, and repeatedly raped him.¹⁷⁴ After the militia commander laughed at the Green Berets’ attempts to intervene and stop the behavior, they reacted physically. One of the Green Berets was relieved from command for striking the militia commander, while the Army attempted to forcibly retire the other for assisting.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Joseph Goldstein, “U.S. Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Allies,” *New York Times*, 20 September 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/asia/us-soldiers-told-to-ignore-afghan-allies-abuse-of-boys.html>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Being confronted by locals engaging in human rights abuses is not unique to our recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. For instance, Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann and his fellow advisors witnessed atrocities in Vietnam while advising those who belonged to what was supposedly an already-professional, uniformed military force. Soldiers, to include officers, from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were known to torture captured North Vietnamese guerillas by dislocating their shoulders, cutting them with Bowie knives, or forcing them to sit on the handle end of an entrenching tool.¹⁷⁶

Incidents like these do not bode well for the eventual acceptance of the security force by the populace after U.S. involvement ends. Indeed, this presents a major challenge when working with indigenous forces; while their objectives may line up with U.S. objectives, there is often no way to control their actions, particularly when those actions may be in contravention of American values or morals.

C. THE “WHO ARE WE WORKING WITH PROBLEM?”—CAN WE TRUST THEM AFTER THE CONFLICT?

The current fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq is already beginning to manifest related issues that come with working with indigenous forces. As the training and equipping of rebel forces by the Pentagon and the CIA ramped up in 2016, it was reported that rebels backed by the CIA were actively fighting other groups that were backed by the Pentagon.¹⁷⁷ As one news report pointed out, this showed just “how little control U.S. intelligence officers and military planners have over the groups they have financed and trained.”¹⁷⁸

In 2013, there were roughly 1,000 armed opposition groups in Syria, comprised of nearly 100,000 fighters.¹⁷⁹ A similar situation emerged in Libya after the ouster of

¹⁷⁶ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 102–103.

¹⁷⁷ Nabih Bulos, W.J. Hennigan, and Brian Bennett, “In Syria, Militias Armed by the Pentagon Fight Those Armed by the CIA,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 March 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-cia-pentagon-isis-20160327-story.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ “Guide to Syrian Rebels,” BBC News, 13 December 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

Muammar Ghadafi, with an estimated 2,000 militia groups fighting for control of the country.¹⁸⁰ Given that these groups would not exist if they did not have conflicting agendas and interests, further complicated by differing interpretations of Islam, one has to wonder: which of them deserves assistance? Which should be placed into power? And then, will that group, or set of groups, be able to pacify the others and convince them to either lay down their arms or join the new government?

When identifying a resistance or guerrilla force to work with, the assessment seldom includes whether or not those forces will be capable of running a government as the conflict abates. The primary concern, instead, is to find groups willing to take up arms and fight against the occupying power or hostile government. Worth asking is: are any of the current militia commanders in Syria and Libya capable of moving from the fighter role into the governance role? The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) currently receive support from the U.S., but consist mainly of Kurds and a small minority of Arabs.¹⁸¹ Will the Kurds have the ability or legitimacy to govern in Syria after the conflict? Alternatively, will they willingly lay down their arms and accept whatever Arab government might emerge?

These issues illuminate a problem with reactionary UW. While its use is clearly justified, the issue of preparation again comes into play. With no prior knowledge of any of the resistance forces, the U.S. vetted its Syrian partner forces as individuals, not as units.¹⁸² There was no indigenous chain of command established, with a strategic leader on the Syrian side to vouch for the conduct of his forces.¹⁸³ As a result, different groups with different objectives and agendas continue to compete—sometimes viciously.

UW advocates might claim that this could be resolved via the continuous preparation discussed previously. However, it seems doubtful that U.S. SOF could have successfully mapped and vetted Syrian resistance networks prior to the outbreak of

¹⁸⁰ “Guide to Key Libyan Militias,” BBC News, 11 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533>.

¹⁸¹ Robert Burns, “Top U.S. Commander Makes Secret Visit to Syria,” Associated Press, 21 May 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/7d37c6bc249e4cc088fd04e731a54d08>.

¹⁸² Mark Grdovic, phone conversation with author.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

conflict, or even shortly thereafter. Even had some of the resistance forces been previously identified and vetted, how many new groups would have still emerged? Even more to the point, how could those forces, some of whom are sponsored by Iran, have been handled by the U.S. and its resistance forces?

D. EQUIPPING THE PARTNER FORCE—FLOODING THE BATTLEFIELD WITH WEAPONS

Equipping a sponsored force can also create problems once the conflict ends. For example, it is estimated that over the past 15 years the U.S. provided nearly 1.5 million firearms (to include assault rifles, pistols, and machine guns) to Iraqi and Afghan forces.¹⁸⁴ Hundreds of thousands of these weapons are no longer accounted for, though many have been seen in the hands of ISIS fighters in pictures and video footage.¹⁸⁵ While plans for unconventional warfare call for the disarmament of guerilla fighters at the end of hostilities, it is difficult, if not impossible, to ensure that weapons provided by a sponsor do not reemerge in the hands of enemies in future conflicts.

E. MISALIGNMENT OF OBJECTIVES

Beyond the inability to control individual surrogate behavior, when objectives are not aligned between a sponsor and its proxy force, priorities will not align either. The United States strives to create stable, independent countries that can stand on their own. However, without a common adversary over the long-term, maintaining significant influence in another state may be impossible:

The successful hegemon has to create dependent allies to avoid relying on a temporary coincidence of interests; this is particularly the case in the absence of long-term shared enemies. The end of the Cold War might for this reason have made the task of the hegemon all the more complicated.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ C. J. Chivers, “How Many Guns Did the U.S. Lose Track of in Iraq and Afghanistan? Hundreds of Thousands,” *New York Times Magazine*, 24 August 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/magazine/how-many-guns-did-the-us-lose-track-of-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-hundreds-of-thousands.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Giustozzi and Kalinovsky, *Missions of Modernity*, 352.

During the Cold War, the U.S. and its allies shared the same grievance: communism. However, once the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan end, it is not clear what the United States and those it supports will continue to have in common.

F. UW IN THE BALTICS: DEFINITELY, MAYBE

In early 2014, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from power. In the resulting chaos, it took Russia only months to annex the Crimean Peninsula and initiate a civil war in Eastern Ukraine. The United States defense establishment was soon abuzz with terms like “Little Green Men” and “Hybrid Warfare.” Russia achieved its objective of maintaining access to a warm-water port, while preventing Ukraine from aligning itself with NATO and the West, by utilizing special operations forces, supplemented with conventional units.¹⁸⁷

As Crimea was annexed and Ukraine imploded, NATO and U.S. European Command (EUCOM) grappled with what would come next.¹⁸⁸ The initial prediction was that Russia would soon use similar techniques in the Baltic States - Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania. NATO planners worried that by utilizing plain-clothed, covert SOF operatives, Russia could incite the same sort of chaos within a NATO country. According to the thinking at the time, by not undertaking conventional military action, Putin would count on NATO not invoking Article V, and consequently, NATO would fail to properly defend one of its member states.

Nearly three years later, Russia has not fulfilled these prophecies. Instead, NATO responded to the fear of Russian actions splintering the Alliance by increasing combined exercises across Europe. For instance, at the Wales Summit in 2014, NATO announced that a very high readiness joint task force (VJTF) would be integrated into its NATO Response Force (NRF). Today, the Operations section of NATO’s webpage includes

¹⁸⁷ For an excellent, early analysis of the crisis in Ukraine, see *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, edited by Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov.

¹⁸⁸ I served as the aide-de-camp to the Commander, Special Operations Command Europe from July–September 2014 and as the aide-de-camp to the Commander, NATO Special Operations Headquarters from September 2014–May 2015. The analysis of Russia’s actions in this thesis are based off of my attendance at countless meetings with both SOCEUR and NSHQ staffs, in addition to observing senior decision making and analysis at SOCEUR, NSHQ, NATO, and EUCOM.

“Assurance Measures,” with news about what NATO is doing to assure its member states that Russian aggression will not be tolerated.¹⁸⁹

Meanwhile, the Baltic States have taken measures into their own hands. In Estonia, the Estonian Defense League holds weekend military exercises and competitions, designed to teach its citizens how to become guerrillas in the event of an invasion.¹⁹⁰ In Lithuania, authorities recently issued a manual to their citizens advising them on how to contribute to resistance movements against a Russian incursion.¹⁹¹ This was the third edition since the seizure of Crimea.¹⁹²

The prospect of a Russian invasion of the Baltics mirrors the threat faced by U.S. Special Forces soldiers in Europe early in the Cold War. As previously noted, the first members of 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) were meant to be stay-behind fighters in Europe to organize resistance movements after a Soviet invasion. So, if Russia decided to invade the Baltics, would UW be a viable mission for SF to conduct?

The first response to a Russian invasion would be the invoking of Article V. Given the acute awareness about the techniques used in Crimea and Ukraine, there would be little debate today about whether the presence of “Little Green Men” meets the threshold for NATO members to agree that an attack had occurred. NATO’s actions over the last three years have clearly signaled to its members that Russian aggression against the Alliance will not be tolerated.

Nonetheless, if Russia should decide to invade a Baltic State, it would still be a matter of time before NATO could mobilize its conventional forces to respond with the VJTF or NRF. While the invaded country might be quickly overrun by numerically superior Russian forces, an event like this would trigger a massive response from NATO. This response would not be a unilateral effort organized solely by the United States.

¹⁸⁹ “Operations,” Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, accessed on 28 October 2016, <http://www.shape.nato.int/operations>.

¹⁹⁰ Andrew E. Kramer, “Spooked by Russia, Tiny Estonia Trains a Nation of Insurgents,” *New York Times*, 31 October 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/world/europe/spooked-by-russia-tiny-estonia-trains-a-nation-of-insurgents.html>.

¹⁹¹ Nic Robertson et al., “Lithuania Issues Manual on What to Do if Russia Invades,” CNN, 28 October 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/28/europe/lithuania-war-manual/>.

¹⁹² Ibid.

While overall command would fall to the Supreme Allied Commander – Europe (SACEUR—a U.S. 4-star general officer), command of the NRF belongs to one of NATO’s two joint forces commands: JFC-Brunssum or JFC-Naples. JFC-Brunssum is currently commanded by an Italian 4-star general officer.

The point of drawing attention to this chain of command is to illustrate how foolish it would be for the United States to help a fellow NATO member prepare to resist without coordinating these efforts within NATO. After all, the resistance force would need to synchronize its unconventional warfare campaign with the NRF counter-attack in order to maximize both forces’ effectiveness. In other words, resistance plans would need to be coordinated and synchronized with NATO response plans, which requires more than just the U.S. working separately with individual countries. Effective lines of communication should be established not just within an occupied or attacked country, but among neighbors and their resistance forces as well. For instance, how much more effective would a resistance in Estonia be if those forces were able to coordinate with the Lithuanian or Latvian resistance?

Remote as the occupation of Estonia might seem, such a scenario offers a clear window into the kinds of circumstances under which unconventional warfare is most likely to work in the future. Not surprisingly, this is not dissimilar to the successful Jedburgh efforts of World War II, when the United States did not act alone, but instead contributed to a multilateral effort. Not only would those conducting UW would have a shared adversary and shared objectives, but the campaign would also be completely justified in the eyes of the international community. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it would be defensive in nature. The purpose would not be to overthrow a sitting regime, but instead to defend an ally from an outside aggressor. Or, if we were to summarize via a “check-list” of criteria that would need to be met for UW to be an appropriate strategy:

- The action must be defensive in nature—preemptive regime change should be avoided.
- The action must be justified in the eyes of the international community. The United States can no longer “go it alone.”

- The action must be multilateral in nature. The Jedburghs succeeded in part thanks to their multinational teams, since at least one member was from the country in which they operated. This ensured at least some level of cultural connectivity to the population being assisted.
- There must be a long-term, shared objective. Marriages of convenience should be avoided at all costs since they will simply lead to more complex problem sets following the UW campaign.
- UW should be conducted with current allies in a way that allows for some level of multi-lateral preparation. The U.S. coordinating potential resistance activities with Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia through a shared command, such as the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ) would be a good example of this.
- The resistance must have a strategic leader at the top of its chain of command. This leader has to be able to coordinate with NATO, the United States, or a coalition, and have a high level of control of the resistance forces to prevent post-conflict issues.

VII. UW AS A STRATEGY, THE ROLE OF SPECIAL FORCES, AND FINAL THOUGHTS

A. WILL A COHERENT STRATEGY FIX THIS?

The never-ending nature of the debate over UW can be seen most recently in the response to a recent *War on the Rocks* article, written by Captain Andrea Filozof.¹⁹³ Captain Filozof's article notes that proxy forces are unpredictable and often have long-term policy objectives that do not align with U.S. objectives.¹⁹⁴ She also uses the term, "policy blowback," to describe situations in which long-term success is sacrificed for short-term solutions.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, Captain Filozof succinctly captures the dangers of assuming that unconventional warfare can limit long-term U.S. commitments or involvement:

This doctrine [UW] holds that the United States can exert its influence through limited involvement to achieve its policy objectives, sidestepping the publicly unpalatable notion of large and prolonged military commitments. Yet the perception that unconventional warfare requires only limited involvement is a dangerous illusion. Not only does training and equipping proxy forces still exact a heavy financial cost, but the operational success of proxy forces often does not lead to the desired political outcome. Serious problems arise when ways and means are not connected to ends. Without organic political solutions to accompany unconventional warfare campaigns, the United States will at best waste vast amounts of defense spending; at worst, it will find itself entangled in the same costly, long-term operations it has endured in Iraq and Afghanistan with little to show for its efforts.¹⁹⁶

Within hours of the article being published, Colonel (Retired) Dave Maxwell provided his comments and critique. Maxwell, a retired Special Forces officer, is the author of multiple articles on UW in forums like *War on the Rocks* and *Small Wars Journal*, and was also a member of the working group that developed the current

¹⁹³ Andrea Filozof, "Unconventional Warfare Is Not the Answer to Your Problem," *War on the Rocks*, 28 September 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/09/unconventional-warfare-is-not-the-answer-to-your-problem/>.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

definition. In his response to Captain Filozof, he objects to her reference to the Jedburghs by calling it a “tired analogy of the UW in WWII France,” and states that her writing, “belies the fact that she does not understand unconventional warfare (or acknowledge the concepts of foreign UW being conducted by adversaries).”¹⁹⁷

Maxwell writes in one of his own articles that although the current definition of UW is designed “to be a broad definition and apply generally to this form of warfare and not specifically from a U.S. centric perspective, it continues to connote a very narrow description of warfare (e.g., the overthrow of a hostile government) and has often been relegated to the province of Special Operations Forces and more specifically Special Forces.”¹⁹⁸ However, a slightly different perspective is offered by Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Mark Grdovic, another member of the working group.

According to Grdovic, the purpose of the working group was to clarify the definition of UW, not to change it.¹⁹⁹ He notes that, “decision makers need to be clear what you are seeking and need to have confidence you understand “it.” So, our approach was to force any user of the definition into a clear box for what you are conveying and also for what you would need to understand as a practitioner.”²⁰⁰

This difference in opinion is reflected in more of Maxwell’s writings. In a 2013 article, Maxwell writes that, “there is controversy over the definition and many do not agree with it even in the Special Operations community.”²⁰¹ He thus exposes a glaring problem with unconventional warfare—if the doctrinal definition cannot be agreed upon, or even understood by a company grade officer like Captain Filozof,²⁰² then how can it be properly conveyed to and understood by senior decision makers who often lack military experience?

¹⁹⁷ David S. Maxwell, 28 September 2016, comments on Filozof, “Unconventional Warfare Is Not the Answer,” <http://warontherocks.com/2016/09/unconventional-warfare-is-not-the-answer-to-your-problem/>.

¹⁹⁸ David S. Maxwell, “Do We Really Understand Unconventional Warfare?” *Small Wars Journal*, 23 October 2014.

¹⁹⁹ Grdovic, email to author.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ David S. Maxwell, “Thoughts on the Future of Special Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, 31 October 2013.

²⁰² The famous “Napoleon’s Corporal” analogy comes to mind here.

Maxwell tackles this problem head on in several of his articles (one is even titled, “Do We Really Understand Unconventional Warfare?”). At the heart of Maxwell’s argument is his opinion that UW is a *strategy*—one that is being used against the United States by its adversaries, but that is not properly understood by Americans.²⁰³ In an article called, “Unconventional Warfare Does Not Belong to Special Forces,”²⁰⁴ he has also argued that, “the strategic mission of UW belongs to policy makers and strategists at the national level.”²⁰⁵

A possible conclusion from reading Maxwell’s articles is that unconventional warfare itself is not the problem. Instead, the problem is a lack of understanding about what UW really is, combined with the lack of a coherent, national strategy and policy governing the use of UW. Or, as Maxwell tries to point out to Captain Filozof, “It is not UW that is the problem. It is our lack of understanding and our misapplication of UW concepts that is [sic] the problem.”²⁰⁶

Here, I respectfully disagree. As this thesis has tried to make clear, the definition is problematic, further complicated by Special Forces’ claim that they are the nation’s UW force. Of course, the real issue can be illustrated in the example of a U.S. embassy team, trying to work daily with its host nation government to further U.S. interests abroad. How do they perceive the prospect of Special Forces working in their country, when SF advertises its core competency as coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing governments?

In a recent PowerPoint brief to my peer group, the Commander of Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAF) displayed unconventional warfare as a grayed-out capability; this, he explained, was to prevent audiences from associating UW with SOF activities on the continent. Recently, too, a fellow SF officer at the Special Operations Legislative Affairs (SOLA) office mentioned to me that UW is a contentious issue for civilian policy makers in Washington, DC. Meanwhile, UW is not even included in

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Maxwell, “Unconventional Warfare Does Not Belong.”

²⁰⁵ Maxwell, “Thoughts on the Future of Special Operations.”

²⁰⁶ Maxwell, comments on Filozof, “Unconventional Warfare Is Not the Answer.”

NATO SOF doctrine. This is because the Alliance is built on the concept of collective *defense*, and does not want to entertain the notion of *offensively* interfering with other countries, especially when some NATO members are more worried about UW being used against them.

The evidence seems overwhelming: If no one outside of SF wishes to entertain the idea of engaging in UW as it is currently defined, then perhaps UW is the problem, at least as it has been defined in SF doctrine over the last 20 years. Put more simply, if you are the only person in the room advocating for an offensive UW mission that no one else wants to undertake, then maybe it is time to reevaluate offensive UW and its utility in today's environment.

As for the argument that what is needed is a coherent national strategy and policy to govern UW, consider the Cold War, during which the U.S. consistently used UW as part of its national strategy against communism to avoid conventional or nuclear war. During the 1950s, "Eisenhower was very cautious about committing military forces, understanding from experience the risks of unintended consequences. But his fondness for deception tempted him to see covert action as a policy tool (and blinded him to the potential high cost of coups gone wrong)."²⁰⁷

By definition, a strategy should cover an extended period of time. For instance, a chess grandmaster strategizes not by only thinking about his next move, but by planning three or four moves in ahead. Based on his experience and the rules of chess, the grandmaster tries to predict what his moves will provoke his opponent to do. But, no matter how good a grandmaster might be at chess, strategizing is not likely to work if his every move throws the playing field into total disarray, or if the game has no rules at all.

Here is how developing a strategy around UW becomes problematic: UW inherently destabilizes a country, and sometimes an entire region. Even the best planned, most well-intentioned UW campaigns will create some level of instability as the efforts undertaken begin to affect the targeted government. The more the government is

²⁰⁷ Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 95.

destabilized, the more unpredictable its actions become, in addition to freeing up an even more unpredictable population that wants to have its say. In the midst of this chaos, how can the United States possibly build viable policies and strategies?

B. THE PREMIER COMBINED FORCE OF THE UNITED STATES

To be clear, this is not to say that Army Special Forces should entirely abandon the concept of unconventional warfare, or should stop training and educating its personnel on the UW mission. Knowing how to conduct UW is still valuable in the event that it is needed. However, it needs to be acknowledged that offensive UW is one of the least likely missions SF will be asked to perform. Indeed, short of defending an occupied ally, it is likely that engaging in UW will do more harm than good. Because of this, UW is not the mission set that SF should prioritize, or claim as its core competency.

In addition to claiming to be the United States' UW force, SF has also declared itself in recent years to be "the only element in the U.S. Armed Forces organized, trained, and equipped specifically for UW."²⁰⁸ However, this claim is misleading. While equipment and training has been updated through the years, the basic organization of a Special Forces ODA, or A-Team, has not been significantly altered since 1952. In other words, the organization of the basic Special Forces unit has never been adapted to the changing definition of UW.

Additionally, offensive UW has never belonged to Special Forces. The CIA ran UW operations fairly exclusively until the Vietnam War, with SF participating only in limited UW efforts afterwards (e.g., the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan or the 2003 supporting effort in the invasion of Iraq). The CIA's own historical archives describe its UW efforts during the Cold War as having produced mixed results at best. So why would SF now want to claim a historically troubled mission set as its core task? More importantly, if UW is not the answer for SF, what is?

The answer is actually quite simple. Green Berets are *really good* at working with other people. Foreign internal defense, a mission that seeks to strengthen a host nation's

²⁰⁸ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 103.

security forces and help stabilize a country or region, has been the true success story for Special Forces over the years:

Many examples exist of successful, long-duration, low visibility U.S. SOF-centric FID operations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. From 1980 through 1991, U.S. support to the government of El Salvador fighting an insurgency in that country included an advisory force that never exceeded 55 personnel. The conflict ended with a favorable negotiated settlement. Similar success against lower level insurgencies took place in neighboring Honduras and Guatemala. More recently, U.S. SOF have played a central role in effective long-term FID efforts conducted in support of the governments of Colombia and the Philippines.²⁰⁹

However, FID's doctrinal definition focuses primarily on assisting other governments counter internal threats, such as "subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to their security."²¹⁰ This has opened the door to the conventional military conducting security force assistance (SFA), since that definition also includes "transnational threats."²¹¹

Exacerbating this issue is the fact that SOF essentially ceded the train, advise, and assist mission to the conventional military in 2002. When it came time to build an Afghan National Army, the mission went to Task Force PHOENIX, commanded by then-Colonel Mark Milley, the commander of 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division.²¹² By the time Task Force PHOENIX II assumed this training mission, even the regular Army could not be bothered to participate, handing what was arguably the most important tasking at that time over to the Army National Guard.

Similar decisions took place during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. As an infantry lieutenant assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division in 2006, I and my platoon were tasked with training an entire Kurdish battalion during our 15-month deployment. The ODAs

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Security Force Assistance, Joint Doctrine Note 1-13* (Washington, DC: 29 April 2013), viii.

²¹¹ Ibid., vii.

²¹² Brian F. Neumann, Lisa Munday, and Jon Mikolashek, *The U.S. Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom, March 2002–April 2005*, Center for Military History Publication 70-122-1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2013), 28.

assigned to our forward operating base worked only with an Iraqi SOF unit of approximately 20 men, rotating out every six months. This represents just one example of what occurred across the entire force, in both Afghanistan and Iraq: SOF sought to only train other SOF, while the conventional military would stand up and train the Afghan National Army and the Iraqi Army. This was the division of labor, despite the fact that conventional units like mine were devoid of cultural knowledge or local language capability, and were trained only for unilateral operations. To make matters worse, most conventional units were more focused on learning how to conduct counterinsurgency operations, leaving the training of their partner force as a lower priority.

After the Iraqi Army nearly collapsed in the face of an ISIS offensive in 2014, the United States launched Operation INHERENT RESOLVE, and once again deployed troops to Iraq. While the stated mission of the task force in Iraq remains to defeat ISIS,²¹³ ground troops have been deployed not to fight directly, but instead to train and stabilize the Iraqi Army. The first unit chosen to execute this mission was 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, a conventional military unit.

Once the assessment was made that the Iraqi Army needed to be retrained, the first thought of any senior decision maker should have been, “Where are my Special Forces?” 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) should have been a logical first choice for standing up a joint task force. However, external perceptions of Special Forces no longer support it being the force of choice for a massive train, advise, and assist missions like Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. The “Big Army” perception of what SF does instead can best be seen in a 2-star general officer’s recent comment to me: “Remember, SOF trains other SOF.”

While the debate over whether the conventional military can train a force as well as Special Forces can exceed the scope of this thesis, the merits of the composition of the force and the force structure across both types of unit can be quickly examined: is it really preferable to task an 18-year old U.S. private, trained only for his role in a unilateral squad-level attack, to conduct the equivalent of basic training for an Iraqi

²¹³ “About CJTF-OIR,” Operation Inherent Resolve, accessed on 05 November 2016, <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/About/>.

private? Or, should the task instead go to a specially selected, and well trained, Green Beret. By requirement, the Green Beret is an NCO with cultural and language training, in addition to possessing knowledge about small unit tactics. Would the Iraqi private respond better to training from an SF NCO than from an American infantry private? That question deserves deeper study and discussion, but the answer should already be known by every senior decision maker, whether civilian or military.

FID and SFA are not “sexy” mission sets to be sure. But, arguably, they are what Special Forces is best at. Thus, instead of declaring itself to be the UW force for the United States, Special Forces should consider promoting itself as the premier *combined* force of choice for the U.S. military. *Combined* is defined by the Department of Defense as “two or more forces or agencies of two or more allies operating together.”²¹⁴ In other words, if there is a task requiring work with a partner force, Special Forces should be the first unit considered for the job. The work could range from providing basic training to Colombian Army recruits, to practicing combined counterterrorism techniques with the German Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK), to accompanying and fighting next to Iraqi Army battalions in battles against ISIS.

By shifting the narrative away from UW and back to combined missions, Special Forces would not only increase its relevance amongst today’s Special Operations Forces, but it would also take important steps toward regaining its autonomy in operations around the world. Initially in Vietnam, Green Berets were dispatched as advisors, but were trusted to train and accompany their partner forces as they saw fit. These partners ranged from conventional Army of the Republic of Vietnam battalions to irregular Montagnard Civilian Irregular Defense units. Provided a host nation agrees, today’s Special Forces should be given the same level of autonomy and trust to perform their advisory missions in any conditions.

C. A FINAL NOTE: COUNTER-UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

One aim of this thesis has been to call into question the wisdom of the United States conducting offensive unconventional warfare. Many of the objections that can be

²¹⁴ Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 40.

raised about UW are not shared by other countries, some of which are currently conducting UW against the United States and its allies. As Colonel Maxwell notes, “UW is widely practiced in various forms today and has adapted to modern conditions . . . It is imperative that the U.S. military and strategists and policy makers have a deep understanding of unconventional warfare and the requirement to counter it in the coming years.”²¹⁵

As previously noted, Russia may have conducted a form of UW by disrupting the 2016 U.S. presidential election, perhaps going so far as to actually coerce portions of the American population into voting a certain way.²¹⁶ Russia’s use of surrogates and SOF during the seizure of Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine reflect another use of UW. Iran continues to use proxy forces across the Middle East to further its interests, sometimes attempting to coerce or disrupt governments that the U.S. is working to assist and stabilize. These adversaries clearly do not have the same political, ethical, or diplomatic concerns as the United States does when it comes to conducting unconventional warfare.

Because of this, *counter*-unconventional warfare also warrants further discussion and study. However, simply understanding how to execute a tactic does not necessarily mean you are the best at countering its use. Discussions about counter-UW should start at the strategic level. Does counter-unconventional warfare, for instance, warrant its own definition? Should it be a mission set assigned to a particular force? Or should it simply be treated as a line of effort within another strategy?

As important as these questions are, Army Special Forces should also evaluate whether their force structure and knowledge of UW makes them the optimal force for countering an adversary’s UW efforts. It is quite possible that SF *would* make a perfect counter UW force. But it is also possible that what is required to counter UW is better

²¹⁵ Maxwell, “Thoughts on the Future of Special Operations.”

²¹⁶ At the time of this thesis’ writing, it is still not clear what exact role Russia played in the WikiLeaks email releases that occurred during the election, but public officials have acknowledged some level of Russian involvement.

executed by another type of unit. The answer can only be found in an additional hard-nosed, unsentimental study.

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